

URBAN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN THE CRUCIBLE: EMPIRICAL OVERTONES OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENT MEDDLING IN LOCAL URBAN COUNCILS AFFAIRS IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This article explores the criticalness of decentralized governance as a solution towards service delivery challenges experienced by urban centres. But, in Zimbabwe centre-local relations are a phenomenological reflection of a tendency towards (re)centralization than decentralization. This is clearly visible in the widespread political interference by central government's Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing in the administrative affairs of urban councils. The results from a survey of a sample of fifty-two respondents on the Zimbabwean urban governance status revealed that issues of political interference revolved around the firing of legitimate councils and mayors, control of all council reforms including generation of funds, politicking in the chambers, unlawful appointments, and the use of commissions. Constitutional amendment has been cited as a big step towards political interference in urban governance of the country.

Keywords: decentralisation, citizenship, sustainable development, urban politics, constitution, financial management, interference

1. Introduction

This paper examines the level and extent of the Zimbabwean central government interference into the urban councils' affairs indicating a propensity to (re)centralization and the implications it has on governance (Oyono, 2004; Raufu and Lindsay 2009). This comes from the background that the country, in 1980, adopted a tri-structured local government system comprising rural, district and urban councils

(Nkomo, 2002; MLGPWNH, 2004). But economic and institutional challenges faced by the government led to the reformation of the existing policies and legislation then (cf. Cochrane, 2007), ultimately reducing the types of local authorities to a dichotomous arrangement of rural-district councils and urban councils. This development was cherished by many countries in Africa as an advanced system of administering local affairs (UCAZ, 2003b). Local authorities by their nature provide lower level structures for democratic (political) debates, social and economic development (Mawhood (ed), 1993). They are a critical platform for debating local issues by the instrument of representative democracy (SALGA, 1997). Councillors are elected every four years (UCAZ, 2003a; GoZ, 1996). A full council, as an institution composed of councillors and employees of an urban council makes resolutions and by-laws - key tools for managing local government affairs. Council resolutions, of equivalency to policy, are the source of council vision, plans, programmes and projects (UCAZ, 2003a). It is the creation and administration of such policies that can bring and perpetuate a system of good governance in the management of urban councils (MLGPWNH, 2004). Zimbabwe's local government system is an exact replica of the British style. Redlich in Dearlove (1979), referring to Britain argues that as with the national parliament (grand legislative assembly) so are the local councils (petite parliament) whereby local citizens elect the councillors who have to work under the censorship of local opinion and execute their commands by the instrument of the technocratic professionals the councils hire (MHLG 1967; cf. Magnusson, 2006).

Since the year 2000 central government uncalled for interventions have manifested in the form of increased firing of legally elected urban councils (e.g. of Mutare, Harare, Chitungwiza) by the Minister of Local Government, National Housing and Urban Development (MLGPWNH) replacing these by appointed District and provincial administrators who report directly to central government (cf. Herald, 2008). The 'residual' mayors and councils have been impelled to report to provincial and district administrators who, by their nature, are civil servants. The civil servants have adopted a confrontational rather than a collaborative approach to the management of urban councils contrary to the provisions of the existing legislation (Kamete, 2002). This is in contravention of the principles of decentralization and good governance (Johnson and Minis, undated; Joint UNDP-Government of Germany, 1999; Prakash, 2002; Magnusson, 2006). It is lamentable that in this same period of the messy reality of governance in the country the economic meltdown in the country has rendered most of the councils un-creditworthy to local and international banks, leaving the borrowing powers by urban councils in the hands of central government to the detriment of rapid decision-making let alone service delivery (cf. Osiche, 2007). Almost all towns and cities in Zimbabwe have been grappling with raising sufficient revenues for capital and recurrent expenditures (local budget deficits) over the past almost decade (2000-2009). Multilateral and bilateral institutions stopped funding Zimbabwean urban councils in this period due to the political

tensions between the country and the international community due to the challenges including but not limited to: the land question, governance and political intolerance of the opposition. There has been a conflict of view and ideology, approach between The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and Zimbabwe African National Union- Patriotic Party (ZANU-PF). As the ruling party fired the urban councils spearheaded by the opposition there is no doubt that such is evidence of political interests subduing the cause of democratic good governance (Kamete, 2002; 2003; 2006; cf. Oyono, 2004).

Decentralization is imperative for the effective and efficient pillars of urban councils' financial management:

- revenue assignment, dealing with generation and mobilisation funds,
- expenditure assignment, controlling the utilization of budgeted funds,
- borrowing, supplementing shortage of funds through loans from banks, public and private creditors and
- financial transfers involving grants and loans from central government (Davey, 1996).

To become better cities, urban governance structures need to ensure that the urban environment they create and maintain for their citizens is socially just, ecologically sustainable, politically participatory, economically productive and culturally vibrant (Magnusson, 2006). Yet, the Zimbabwean constitution is unclear on the local government system and authority boundaries. Although the Urban Councils Act details the urban councils' management procedures and defines the powers of the minister also, the same minister is the custodian of the Act and therefore can amend the Act and at will (MLGPWNH, 2004; GoZ, 1996). This can be detrimental to standard good service delivery in the urban areas.

2. STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Zimbabwe comprises twenty two (22) urban local authorities ranging from town boards to cities; administered by one piece of legislation, the Urban Councils Act with the Ministry of Local Government, National Housing and Urban Development supervising the implementation of this legislation (GoZ, 1996). The researchers randomly picked three cities (Harare, Mutare and Bulawayo) and one municipality for political and economic considerations. The selected sample (the four urban centres) constitutes about 18% of the universe. Respondents were stratified into employees and councillors (the policy makers and supervisors of employees) first. Secondly convenience sampling was used to pick on all heads of departments (a group of respondents which sits in crucial councils meetings, plan for respective departments, and having access to the relevant information needed for the research). The councillors were subjected to simple random sampling to choose the final respondents. In total as

sample of 49 respondents was picked from a population of 130. The final composition of the sample as determined by those who responded to the questionnaire and those who were interviewed was as follows:

- councillors (11),
- reluctant informants 3,
- employees (23),
- Ministry of Local Government officers (3),
- Urban Councils Association officers (2), urban councils legal advisors (3) and
- public relations officers (4).

At the time of collecting data Harare had no councillors having been fired by the Minister of Local Government. Commissioners were used in lieu of councillors. Data were collected through interviews, questionnaires and documentary reviews and triangulation was possible using the three methods (cf. Best and Khan, 1993; Cochran, 1977; Cohen and Manion 1986)

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Local government provides a means for the ordinary citizen to take part in public affairs at local level (Mawhood ed, 1993; Davey, 1996; Cloete, 1978). Citizens have an opportunity through their vote to exercise a decisive influence on the general direction of local affairs. Segalo in IULA (1997: 690) argues for decentralized institutions like urban councils citing the pillars of:

- Citizens' contribution towards what directly affects their lives.
- Reform initiatives by the citizens.
- Consequential participation that gives pride in environment and enhancement of community awareness by the citizens.
- Improvement in the flexibility and speed in planning and delivery.
- Meaningful engagement of communities in the process of sustainable development.

Yet, those at the centre argue that power should reside in themselves for a range of reasons: they fear that diffusion of power will threaten national unity and stability and equitable development; that the transfer of power will cause loss of status and influence; that the equitable distribution of power and benefits calls for commitment and political will of the highest order; that central bureaucrats thrive on certainty that will only be secured through direct control of power and resources; that other levels of government lack the capacity to perform the functions that must be performed adequately (AULA 1997:690). Ikhide in Olowu (1999:165) further argues that administratively, local governments are the

preferred forms of decentralisation because they allow for genuine decongestion of the central government as decision-making powers and control of necessary resources are transferred to localities where they are expeditiously exercised to deal with local problems. The service provision function has been identified as the *raison d'être* for the existence of local governments. Conversely, the extent to which any local government is able to provide services is highly political, depending on the administrative mechanisms in place. The primary great advantage of local government lies in the power of the availability and cando of the local knowledge it possesses; local area and population is small enough for the officials as well as the councillors to know it intimately. In the smallest authorities ratepayers and councillors or officials interact well even at personal levels giving an intimate atmosphere of local administration. There is little excuse for any sense of remoteness; these close links between the council and the public usually foster some sense of true democracy akin to that which governed the City States of Ancient Greece.

Sharma in IULA (1997) affirm that democracy and decentralization is more meaningful with local government engaging effective participation of people at that level in the process of governance and in the sphere of accountability. Sharma however bemoans the present nature of governance in most African countries where democracy, decentralization, local government and public accountability remain distant goals and in some cases with rhetorical advocacy and adoption of the tenets for purposes of stabilizing legitimacy of political authority. To strike a balance between centralization and decentralization of authority and functions, a system of democratic decentralization is a necessary precondition. The World Bank in UNCHS (1996:161) stresses that local government could play a greater role if allowed more autonomy and regular, independent sources of revenue, especially in managing the expanding urban networks that link the towns to their hinterlands. In rural areas local services, such as water supply, could be better run at the communal level provided genuine delegation of responsibilities is availed.

Local governments are strategic partners in the decentralization process: on one hand, receiving the transfer of tasks and responsibilities from central government, on the other hand, creating supportive environment for development and resource mobilisation for the implementation of new infrastructure services on a scale that is mostly far beyond their capacity. Strengthening the institutional, financial and professional capacity for the implementation of the relevant policies becomes requirement that must not be obviated in any way. Sharma (1995:53) further reiterates that effectiveness of decentralization and capacities of local level organizations are often limited due to the problems related to policy formulation, implementation, monitoring, guidance and vertical-horizontal two-way communication. In this aspect, the nature of political leadership in local government has a strong bearing on the capabilities of councils and

their effectiveness. Museveni in (UNDP 2000: 182) argues that decentralization measures taken in Uganda have a thrust of undoing the harm inflicted on the local systems of governance by centralisation by unleashing local initiative, invigorating the local democratic process towards sustaining development and enhancing local capabilities for self-governance and delivery of service. The guiding philosophy in the whole process has been that devolution of power, functions and resources will help achieve albeit cheaply, higher performance rates in literacy, life expectancy, cash and food crop production and other indicators of social development.

UNCHS (1996) stresses that the proponents of decentralization recognize the diversity between localities i.e. demand for public services varies from place to place both in quantity and quality, hence the decentralization of the provision for these services can ensure an efficient response to the services demand, in the first place. Secondly, locally-financed and provided services can be very cost effective given the input by community –based or voluntary sector organizations. Thirdly, institutions and organisation are made to account for their actions. This boosts confidence among actors. Lastly, the interdependency and indivisibility of most services provided (water, sewer, roads, etc) provide a relevant platform for local government coordination of these services. Despite a diversity of combinations of decentralization in Africa, each country has retained some peculiar features. For instance, three patterns of relational or structural arrangements are distinct:

- the pure devolution pattern (typical case of Nigeria) where an attempt was made to disband deconcentrated structure;
- the juxtaposed arrangement (where deconcentrated and devolved institutions exist side by side in a rather complex set of interrelations as in most African countries; and
- the integrated arrangement pattern (whereby all institutions are at the same time deconcentrated and devolved as found in the Benin Republic).

Local governments should also be viewed as training grounds for democracy given their provision for political debate and argumentation over issues. Also politicians are so trained, indoctrinated and developed that with time they become gurus not only in their party ideologies but also procedures of political debates with some even rising to upper echelons of regional and national politics. They also learn to adapt to needs from 'below' and form 'above' (vertical integration); through interchange of ideas from other places they tap into lateral integration; and by sharing the different ideas they become versed with different thematic (geographic, cultural, ethnic and historic) frameworks. Enemu in UNDP (2000) opines that the interests of the central government have dominated local government policies and practices from the colonial times to the present however to the obliteration of the interests of the

citizens. As a result, the role and function of local government has been greatly distorted with citizens viewing local authorities not as their institutions but as central government organizations (organs of state power rather than institutions setup by the people, run by the people and for the people). This is confirmed by the observation that the central government tends to treat local authorities as tools created for its use and abuse (the instrumental debate of governance). This has frequently seen local governments being taken as experimental space for new ideas and practices and sometimes exploratory policy decisions (Oyono 2004; Hyden, Olowu, and Ogendo, 2000).

A managerialist perspective of decentralization sees citizens as subject to trigger by the leadership of some elite figure to realise their full capacity for action (Davar, 1996). The extent to which those in policy-making positions believe that others possess initiative capacities, determines the extent to which authority and responsibility are delegated and decentralization occurs. Koontz in Davar (1996) complements this assertion stating that the manager (for example, Ministers of Local Government) has a quintessential role and function of an environment creator and stir up groups and individuals, towards attainment of group purpose. Literature shows that people are more likely to be committed to a development project or programme if they are involved in its planning and preparation; they identify with it and own it (Prakash, 2002; Oyono 2004; Hyden, Olowu, and Ogendo, 2000). Right action and decisions at the right place and time tend to cultivate responsible behaviour and good governance. Overall, despite the argument for a centralized system of governance, decentralization has been supported as a better system of modern and democratic governments (Oyono 2004; Hyden, Olowu, and Ogendo, 2000). Decentralization allows the public to participate in almost all issues that affect their social lives hence facilitates good governance.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The overriding assumption in this paper the period 1980 through to 2008 was a remarkable stage-setting time for the mooted, development and trial of the decentralisation initiative in Zimbabwe. From the mid-nineties to 2000 government interference in urban local affairs fundamentally increased. This development led to a deep-seated recentralization trend. This section of the paper attempts to show the disposition of the interference by central government into local government affairs. Although some drastic changes have resulted with the formation of the all-inclusive government in 2009, much analysis will be devoted to the period before this novel development.

Centralisation of Water and Sewer in Zimbabwe

June 2006, saw the takeover of water and sewer by the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) as a directive from the Minister of Local Government. This saw Morton Jaffray Water Works Plant and its sub-systems being handed over to this central government creation. The rationale by the Minister for this decision of transfer was cited as incapacity by the urban councils to provide adequate water to residents. Yet, empirical evidence show that delivery in this area from the period 2000 to 2008 never changed for the better. In effect, the supply of water in Harare became more erratic with the takeover. ZINWA oftentimes failed to secure chemicals for water purification. There was also constant bursting of major water pipelines. The old infrastructure at Morton Jaffray compounded the whole situation. It was revealed in the study that the City of Harare was not compensated for its infrastructure, transferred to ZINWA.

The action of the transfer, on the whole, deprived the urban local authorities of their traditional revenue sources. The zenith of ZINWA incapacity manifested in the widespread of cholera outbreak whose cradle was the city, particularly Budiriro high-density suburb in Harare. Possible causes of the cholera outbreak, as suggested by the respondents included but not limited to:

- lack of supply of clean water in urban areas,
- bursting of the sewerage systems/ failure by administrators to maintain the all-important infrastructure,
- lack of water for flushing in toilets,

Some respondents cited conflicts in the council chambers, politicking, mismanagement, bankruptcy as the plausible causes for the outbreak of the disease. The general deterioration of the health delivery systems was also cited as a cause. Experts indicated the contradiction of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Six which is summarised as “combat the impact of water borne diseases, such as diarrhoea”.

Ministerial issuance of directives and circulars

Directives are therefore a major tool used by central government in meddling with issues of a local nature (Herald, 2008). These machinations traded good governance for political advantages and because of this central government therefore came very heavy on urban councils thereby thwarting any remaining elements of freedom, good governance, commitment, initiative, etc among councillors and council employees. For example:

- The Minister gave statements to reverse Harare City Council's decision on reinstating city council employees (the Director of Housing, Engineering Director and City Treasurer) illegally fired during the management of a commission.
- The Minister of Local Government was the chief determinant of surcharges and rates. Urban councils could not increase surcharges or rates without getting permission from the ministry.
- Divide and rule tactics as a result of bickering or politicking and endless clashes of senior managers at Town House (The Herald, 2006)
- The majority of urban councils were charging sub-economic rates to consumers because of ministerial interventions (The Manica Post, 2006).
- Firing of councillors.
- Abolition of the office of the executive mayor.
- Introducing District Administrators and metropolitan governors (specifically for Harare and Bulawayo) in urban areas.
- Central government failed to honour payment of its debts even in the Zimbabwe dollar currency (abandoned in 2009). Respondents argued that with the economic meltdown, the ministries no longer care about their indebtedness to city councils (see Table 1).

Respondents felt the intervention of the Ministry was excessive and it stifled innovativeness, especially in councils' debates. As a result most urban councils were reduced to bankruptcy and inability to provide social goods and services to the ratepayers. The overall degeneration was evidenced by poor roads, lack of clean water, lack of capacity to collect garbage and decay of other sectors.

TABLE 1: OUTSTANDING RATES AND CHARGES BY GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES TO THE CITY OF HARARE AS AT 30 JUNE 2004

Ministry	Amount owed (Z\$)
Foreign Affairs	70 870 303.36
Agriculture	36 800 680.57
Air Force	375 387 068.98
Defence	323 736 095.76
Industry and Commerce	2 069 112.23
Education, Sport and Culture	364 458 054.67
Finance	2 026 358.47
Health and Child Welfare	323 706 706. 65
Home Affairs	3 628 598. 27
ZRP	497 782 903. 48
Information	10 564 892. 28
Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs	312 143 252.32
Mines	6 294 898.95
Presidents Office	15 530 664.20
Transport and Communications	45 088 237.77
ZINWA	1 192 793 689.79
Total	3 582 881 517.75

Source: RBZ (2004:12)

Non-payments, inflation and their effect

The neglect to pay urban councils can be viewed as one way towards crippling local government in the country. Also there was reduction of grants given to councils. Table 2 illustrates decrease in the money given for the Public Service Investment Programme (PSIP). This seriously undermined the revenue base for most urban councils in the country when, in effect, they have had a tradition of enormous dependency on various forms of grants. Increasing costs, inflation and devaluation of currency worsened the problem especially to the detriment of construction projects.

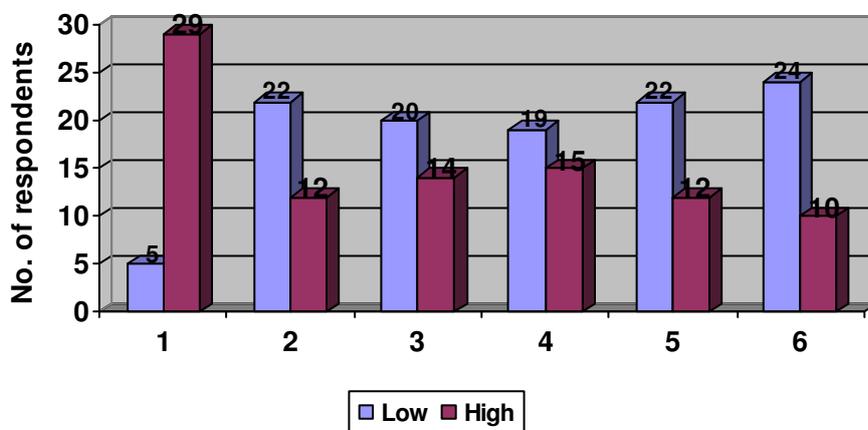
TABLE 2: THE DECLINING PUBLIC SECTOR INVESTMENT PROGRAMME (1997-2000)

Local Authority	Allocation 1997/98(Z\$)	Allocation 1999(Z\$)	Allocation 2000(Z\$)
Bindura Municipality	16 025 000	9 759 000	3 600 000
Bulawayo City Council	67 255 000	21 229 000	9 009 000
Chegutu Municipality	26 160 000	3 740 000	1 250 000
Chinhoyi Municipality	28 040 000	27 520 000	5 500 000
Chitungwiza Municipality	23 151 000	22 520 000	2 000 000
Gwanda Municipality	10 930 000	4 670 000	1 500 000
Gweru City Council	22 900 000	22 809 000	000 000 000
Harare City Council	67 016 000	23 870 000	5 220 000
Hwange Local Board	5 000 000	3 727 000	1 375 000
Kadoma City Council	11 270 000	19 030 000	1 250 000
Kariba Municipality	17 260 000	33 000 000	18 714 000
Karoi Town Council	12 950 000	7 750 000	1 400 000
Kwekwe City Council	11 450 000	10 926 000	1 500 000
Morondera Municipality	20 082 000	56 893 000	18 000 000
Masvingo Municipality	9 600 000	15 565 000	2 500 000
Mutare City Council	22 920 000	47 736 000	11 637 000
Norton Town Council	21 470 000	22 840 000	9 600 000
Redcliff Municipality	25 610 000	18 000 000	11 185 000
Rusape Town Council	12 039 000	12 125 000	1 600 000
Ruwa Local Board		2 500 000	2 000 000
Shurugwi T own Council	8 835 000	8 765 000	1 600 000
Victoria Falls Municipality	23 500 000	36 600 000	11 546 000

Source: RBZ (2004: 5)

The defeat of democracy in council business

Figure 1 shows the responses on the levels of democracy in doing council business. In response to the question on the levels of external influence, 29 respondents (85.3%) felt the levels of external interference was high as opposed to 5 (14.7%) who indicated that the level was low. Twenty-two respondents (64.7%) stated that autonomy of councillors in conducting their business was low while 12 (35.3%) felt it was high. On local participation in the conduct of council business, 20 (58.8%) felt participation was low while 14 (41.2%) believed it was high. On the level of council debates 19(55.9%) respondents indicated that it was low while 15 (44.1%) felt it was high. This result generally confirms the idea that there is too much outside interference in the management of councils. It became obvious then that the levels of debate in the full council meetings were restrained by such external forces. About 6 (54.5%) councillors and 12 (52.2%) employees confirmed that levels debates are low/limited. This result is also consistent with earlier findings that the level of consultation, initiatives and participation in decision- making was low. Restrained council debates have a strong bearing on policy formulation; it can lead full councils to rubberstamp resolutions formulated by senior employees.



Keys:

- 1 – Levels of external influence
- 2 – Autonomy of councillors in conducting their business
- 3 – Local participation in the conduct of council business
- 4 – Level of debates
- 5 – Level of consultation
- 6 – Encouragement of initiative

FIGURE1: DEMOCRACY IN CONDUCTING COUNCIL BUSINESS

Arbitrary political appointments

The introduction of the offices of District Administrators (DA) and governors in urban areas was highlighted by some mayors felt as a strategy by government to interfere with their operations and to force them also to report to ZANU (PF) appointed functionaries (The Financial Gazette, 2003). It was revealed that such offices were not provided for in the Urban Councils Act (GoZ, 1996) and also unconstitutional. The firing of a council according to a Deputy Secretary in the Ministry of Local Government was the last and drastic option taken when services have deteriorated to levels where the ratepayers cannot get value for their money. In addition the reason could be rampant corruption or generally councillors can be fired for mismanagement of the activities of the councils. To some extent the majority, if not all, urban councils that have been fired by the Minister were dominated by MDC councillors and /or were under MDC Mayors. Also a number of MDC Mayors have been fired and replaced ZANU-PF loyalists. At the time of gathering data for the report (January 2008), Commissions were managing Harare and Mutare; the Mayor of Chitungwiza was fired and replaced by a ZANU (PF) Party official. One respondents observed that a big number of the appointed commissioners were not experts in local government issues, only appointed on patronage bases. Thus their target may not be the society they are supposed to serve but to satisfy selfish ends of national politicians.

Abolition of executive mayorship

In 2008, the government abolished the post of the executive mayor post replacing it with the old system of the ceremonial mayor. It was envisaged by the central government that such a move would reduce the powers of the mayors as provided in the Urban Councils Act. The central government cited abuse of power by the mayors as the chief trigger to this decision. However, a number of antagonists to the move indicated that mayorship was synonymous urban governance which domain has now been taken over by the opposition MDC. According to them, the move was nothing but a *coup de'tat* against the democratically elected mayors in various urban centres of the country. Some mentioned that the matter constituted a constitutional agenda.

All the snippets are evidence to indicate that in Zimbabwe central government has been using various tactics to involve itself in local affairs hence a recentralization tendency. In this aspect, the continuous deterioration of goods and services and the infrastructure in the urban centres has left many stakeholders questioning the credibility of decentralization as a policy option for Zimbabwe.

5. CENTRAL GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS: THE IMPLICATIONS

The research established that the Zimbabwe's constitution is not explicit on the definition of the powers that should be assumed by the Minister of Local Government. Have the minister's powers been clearly stated in the constitution, a lot of tampering with the local government systems, structures and operations without calling for referenda. The Urban Council's Act gives the minister this kind of power (GoZ, 1996). RBZ (2004:14) explains that the local government system in Zimbabwe "...is not entrenched in the constitution as in other countries like South Africa." Thus the minister is not held constitutionally accountable for his or her actions. This explains why, in a bid to alleviate urban problems in the country there have been kick-backs in the form of conflicts and mistrusts in the councils' chambers. Antagonists to the minister's actions of interfering into the local affairs of urban local authorities have cited suffocation of democracy as the major development given the stifling of councils' debates and initiatives. Poor service delivery, weak administrative institutions, ineffective and efficient councils and unaccountable and corrupt urban councils systems have been the result of such frustrating of the representative voice of the citizens.

Furthermore, the research revealed that council business was dominated by party politics thus adding confusion in the platform of the apolitical and neutral role of local government as it addresses the needs of the citizens. Although the council comprises of politicians (mayors and councillors) and technocrats, in conducting council business a value-neutral position should be adopted. This was not the case in most council meeting. A number of respondents posited that during business sessions valuable time was spent on arguments based on political differences rather than spent that time on harmonizing useful and progressive ideas that could be nurtured to bring about the development of these municipalities. Respondents felt that the commissions (e.g. for Harare, Chitungwiza and Mutare city councils) were supposed to be transitional hence temporary stopgaps but in all cases they turned out to be permanent features in local government as they had their contracts serially renewed before any elections were held. It was stressed that though legal, the commissioners did not represent any constituents like councillors as they were not democratically elected. Despite the fact that the Urban Councils Act stipulates a time period for which a council can be administered by a commission (GoZ, 1996), the Minister of Local Government refused or ignored stakeholders' request for the holding of council election within the stipulated six months. The argument cited is that during this period under discussion, there was no rule of law in the management of urban councils. Yet, the election of councils and their independent and democratic functioning allow for continuity and development of experience in the administration of urban councils.

UNCHS (1996: 161) has stressed that deconcentration is the transfer of functions, but not power, from a central unit to a local administrative office. This is typical of the type of decentralization operative in Zimbabwe's urban councils' administration where the central government falsely portrays it as devolution. Devolution to urban councils works only in principle and on paper. Failure to promote good governance at national level has indirectly impacted on the low structures of government like urban councils. Stakeholders, especially the ratepayers raised the following, inter alia, issues as failed areas due to the recentralisation tendencies by the central government: poor refuse collection, poor street lighting, increase in pot-holes, bursting sewerage systems, and poor purified drinking water. As such the ratepayers expressed lack of confidence in their urban councils. Some of them (the ratepayers) determined to resist payment of rates and taxes. In a number of urban councils such protests did occur.

6. WAY FORWARD AND CONCLUSION

To improve the urban governance situation in Zimbabwe researchers put across a number of suggestions including.

- Amending the Constitution of Zimbabwe so that it lucidly set parameters of the powers of the Minister of Local Government. This will help streamline the actions of the political figure, also giving democracy room for the betterment of the citizenry.
- Formulating legislations and statutory instruments that are impulsive for the minister to put stakeholders' participation before changing an existing law or taking any decision or action in the name of public interest. This has the effect of establishing the rule of law or the principles of democracy and good governance.
- Clearly defining and sticking to the set provisions of the law with respects to the firing incompetent councils, hiring commissioners and making new elections for councils in a more transparent and accountable manner. This helps in confidence building by the citizens in view of their urban managers. In conducting councils' business the councils' by-laws and resolution need to followed. These determine the council's vision, mission and projects.
- Engaging serious stakeholders' participation in all matter affecting their day to day living including food security, transportation, water provision, housing, to name but a few. Representative democracy in the council chambers should be complemented by direct democracy as representatives meet with their constituencies.

- The government must strive to make devolution work in urban local authorities. This will reduce the burden of centralised co-ordination. Effort will then be devoted to guidance of local authorities to meet the needs of the citizens in keeping with constitutional and legislative requirements.

The above analysis and policy suggestions show that Zimbabwe has a great task in restoring the confidence of the ordinary citizen in the institution of the urban council. With a minimum of interference, most urban authorities have a great potential to serve their residence. However, the period from about 2000 to date was a trying time not only for the urban local authorities but also the central government, the generality of the population and the voluntary sector which was also trying to bridge the gaps created by the political impasses and the economic meltdown. Thanks to the setting up of the 'inclusive government' which is in the business of restoring sanity to urban governance, among other things in the country. If there is anything that the constitutional amendment can do for the people of Zimbabwe, it is the stressing on decentralisation and reversing unwarranted (re)centralisation tendencies.

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