

The Evolution and Forms of Decentralisation in Zimbabwe: Experiences from Post-Independence Era, 1980 to 2019

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Abstract: This paper provides an overview of the political and administrative journey taken towards implementing decentralisation in local government context in Zimbabwe since independence in 1980 to 2019. This paper identifies the key landmarks along the way, in terms of legislation, policies, programmes, institutions and actors. The paper reflects on specific Zimbabwean experiences with this complex process, of progress made, and of the lessons that emerge, the challenges, successes, and failures. The guiding question is how decentralisation has evolved and been adopted in Zimbabwe in the post-colonial era? Decentralisation in Zimbabwe as influenced by the global trends evolved from being state centric to individual centric and encompassing stakeholders from the state to individual levels. Legislation on decentralisation in Zimbabwe has been advanced though the practice has been deficient.

Keywords: Decentralisation, Local government, Rural District Councils, Urban Councils

1. Introduction

This paper tracks the evolution and implementation of decentralisation in post-colonial Zimbabwe. It locates the key landmarks along the decentralisation path, in terms of legislation, policies, programmes, institutions and actors, the progress achieved, the emerging lessons, the challenges, and failures. Decentralisation in Zimbabwe has evolved from being state centric in approach at independence to relatively devolved structures with constitutional recognition following the adoption of the 2013 constitutional amendments. The decentralisation routes and roots were necessarily chequered and complex. To begin with, the colonial system had bequeathed a racially biased local government system characterised by relatively autonomous and financially viable Rural and Urban Councils established for white settlers and impoverished and incapacitated (legally, technically, and financially) District Councils catering for 'African affairs' in communal areas.

During the first decade of independence from 1980, the primary concern in public administration was to consolidate nation building in addition to removing racial vestiges and inequalities. Resultantly, the centre played a key role in direct service delivery and often in a manner that undermined the capacities of the local authorities. In 1988, government enacted legislation that facilitated decentralisation and serious debates spurred by fears of various

stakeholders came to the fore. Through cautious and prolonged negotiations, the government was increasingly reaching consensus on decentralisation by 2000. However, the economic down-turn and Zimbabwe's isolation from the international community disrupted the decentralisation momentum and once again both the centre and periphery struggled to survive for a decade till 2009 when a unity government was formed following indecisive and contested Presidential elections in 2008. From 2009, the political and economic situation recovered dramatically and the service delivery capabilities were reconstituted at both national and sub-national levels. The decentralisation debate received attention during the constitutional reform consultation that resulted in a referendum and the adoption of a broad based constitution in 2013. The new constitution of 2013 recognised and pushed the frontiers of decentralisation in Zimbabwe through constitutional recognition of local government as a tier of government with devolution as a guiding framework. In addition, the 2013 constitution defined the inter-governmental fiscal transfer regimes. As has been the nature of decentralisation in Zimbabwe, the legislation and policies have invariably been more advanced than the political will and necessary administrative capacity to implement.

The decentralisation route in Zimbabwe was not linear in fashion, but navigates through the deeply embedded practices, reshaping them, reconciling different and often contradictory interests,

perspectives, and possibilities at specific historical junctures. However, one can still trace the evolution of the process through critical 'shifts' and 'moments', that gave rise to its current shape and practices. The following sections trace the evolution and contours of decentralisation in Zimbabwe along the shifts and turns over the decades. The post-independence era is conveniently divided into epochs; the first decade from 1980 to 1990, the second decade 1991 to 2000, the third decade 2001 to 2008 and the fourth decade being 2009 to 2019.

In transitional settings, decentralisation should promote responsive and participatory local governance (Bland, 2011:341). For data, this paper relies on Ministry of Local Government archival files, legislation, policies and other scholarly publications. This study builds on previous works on decentralisation. Mutizwa-Mangiza (1990, 1992), Wekwete (1992) and Conyers (2003) have written from a sectorial approach concentrating on planning dimension. Bland (2011) covers only two years of transition from the economic crisis. This paper seeks to provide a more comprehensive and historical review of decentralisation initiatives from 1980 to 2019. To a minor extent, the author (having been a functionary in the Ministry of Local Government from 1990 to 2001) reflects on decentralisation experiences.

2. Decolonisation and Impulses Towards Nation Building: The First Post-Independence Decade 1980-1990

Upon attainment of independence from colonial rule, African states typically concerned themselves with establishing a unified state and hence centralisation was common and preferred approach in Public Administrative reform and decentralisation often viewed as potentially divisive, and risky. The Cold War between the Eastern and Western blocs resulted in the USSR and China supporting a number of Third World countries in installing commandist and centralist economic and political strategies and structures as inspired by the socialist and communist ideology. The primary concern was motivating for constitutional and institutional arrangements that would bind together the various and often competing ethnic groups. It was therefore common to promote the concept of one party state at least in practice even where it was not provided for in law. Even in instances where multi parties were allowed, there has been continued hegemonic dominance of a single liberation movement political parties in

post-colonial Africa. In the SADC region for example, liberation movement political parties that gained power at independence have remained in control of governments in Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe, the earliest moves at reconstituting local government structures began at independence in 1980 following the protracted nationalist guerrilla struggle to overthrow the minority white settler regime. The communal peasants who supported and were most affected directly by the war hoped that the emergent black majority government would reverse the 'apartheid nature', racially based economic, social, spatial and political inequities and iniquities entrenched over 90 years since inception of colonial rule in 1890. There was therefore some legitimate expectation of immediate and substantive action by the new government and hence the first decade interventions in local government were typically state centric in approach painted over a canvas of a hard won right of 'one man one vote' and the need to respect the wishes of the poor peasants who had helped the nationalist guerrilla cause.

At independence, among the issues that received immediate attention by the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government, was the racially divided and asymmetrical local government system, that resembled the inequity in land tenure regimes and in the economic and political arrangements more generally. The local government system bequeathed by the departing white settler regime had separate legislation and structures for Urban Councils and for rural local government. Rural local government was marked by the racially based separation between the Rural Councils servicing primarily the white commercial farming communities and what were then African Councils servicing the black peasant communal areas (Roe, 1995:834).

An early amendment to this disparate local government system was the consolidation of about 243 Chiefdom based, African Councils that had become moribund due to war activities, into 55 District Councils, through the enactment of the District Councils Act of 1980 (Mutizwa-Mangiza, 1990:426). This consolidation and renaming of African Councils was a mere administrative operation that did not in any significant way challenge the racial and inequitous nature of the inherited rural local government structures. The power structures and

resource bases of these councils remained intact, dependent on central government subventions for recurrent and for an insignificant capital budgets. As expected by the rural populace and in line with the socialist ideology that the ZANU-PF government had adopted as a guiding philosophy and also in pursuance of a broader project of nation building, central government delivered all substantive social services and infrastructural development in District Council areas. Central government departments such as the Ministries of Health, Transport, and Education and agencies such as the District Development Fund had an active role in directly delivering and upgrading social services and rural infrastructure such as roads and water and sanitation facilities to citizens often bypassing the weak and poorly resourced District Councils.

Besides being sites of the liberation struggle that had suffered damage to infrastructure due to war efforts, the communal (all under District Councils) had suffered severe service and infrastructural deficits having been systemically and systematically neglected, developmentally, under colonial rule. Indeed, in its Election Manifesto, ZANU proposed that its 'government will lay maximum emphasis on the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the economy in all its sectors, following the ravages of the war and effects of sanctions. State action will thus be necessary to rebuild and revamp the economy...' (ZANU, 1980:9). The centrally directed and delivered development programme was also desirable to ensure inter-locality equity as any significant disparities would have perpetuated some colonial inequities. Even though central government direct delivery of services and infrastructure in the District Councils (communal areas) was welcome, politically prudent and administratively judicious, that process, ironically undermined, weakened, and side-lined the District Council in a systematic fashion and Musekiwa (2004:3) argues that 'central government departments operating at the district level often found themselves working in parallel and occasionally in competition with District Councils they were meant to assist'. It took some time and efforts to capacitate and prime District Councils to assume the role of delivering decentralised service and infrastructural functions.

In contrast to the omnipotence and omnipresence of central government departments in District Councils, the Rural Councils (covering all the white commercial farming areas and a smaller number

of small scale African farms) already enjoyed some relative degree of decentralisation. Rural Councils had autonomy (in both law and practice) to generate their own revenues from levies, unit-based land taxes, and generous matching grants from central government. Based on a firm foundation of enabling legislation providing wider powers of authority and relative autonomy from central government than the District Councils, Rural Councils were able to do own planning, service provision and infrastructure delivery. It is also worth noting that the Rural Councils areas had fewer service delivery deficits and a limited demand for services such as health and education. The colonial government had deliberately taken over the provision of essential services for the white settler community at a quality equal to or superior to those in Europe. It was to take a further eight years to 1988 before the legislation unifying the Rural Councils and District Councils was enacted.

The high social expenditure during the first decade of independence increased government expenditure exerting pressure to increasing fiscal stress. As Zimbabwe began accessing international lines of credits and displaying an insatiable appetite for external grants, elements of the international community, development partners, donors and civil society also began to advocate for deregulation, market liberalisation and 'decentralised and participatory' approaches in local government and Public Administration in general.

In order to deliver the services to communal areas more effectively and to address emerging concerns regarding some weaknesses of the heavily centralized national planning system of five-year national development plans, the then Prime Minister issued a Directive of 1984 on Decentralisation. The directive sought to build on the experience and momentum of the 'decentralised and participatory' (liberation struggle) local political structures. In its 1980 election manifesto ZANU observed that, 'the party became truly identified with the people and the people with the party; hence, the people and the party became one' (ZANU, 1980:6). The Prime Minister's Directive of 1984 had a strong and decisive push in the establishment of decentralized subnational participatory planning structures (Mutizwa-Mangiza, 1990:427). The Provincial Councils and Administration Act of 1985 provided the legal framework for the Village and Ward Development Committees created through this directive. The Prime Minister's Directive

failed to achieve effective decentralisation of power or resources to village, ward, or even district level. The Village and Ward Development Committees as developmental and planning structures were conflated with the ZANU-PF party structures and hence the system ended up reinforcing the power and influence of the centre, allowing it to retain its control over space, resources, and decision-making, whilst also bringing it closer and more visible in communal people's everyday lives. Local Government Promotion Officers (all ex-combatants of the liberation war) were 'responsible for establishing and training ward and village development committees' (MLGR&UD, 1994:38). In contrast to the direction from centre in District Councils, the decentralised and relatively autonomous Urban and Rural Councils were free of direct presence of central government in the day-to-day decision making and operations (Wekwete, 1992:101).

The Provincial Councils and Administration Act of 1985 also established the office of Provincial Governors, whose main function became providing the link between the administrative structures of government, and the ruling party. In provinces such as Mashonaland Central, the cadre deployed as Provincial Governor would assume office of ZANU-PF Party Provincial Chairman to facilitate such coordination. The newly appointed Provincial Governors began lobbying for the disbursement of Provincial Global Allocations to counteract the weaknesses of the nationally funded and directed decentralized planning system. The main challenge was that local plans in District Councils were not linked to budgets and the needs and demands of the local people (Mutizwa-Mangiza, 1992:113) were frequently ignored in favour of the requirements and limitations of central planning. Conyers (2003:116) notes that though, 'development planning was decentralised in the 1980s, the allocation of development funds remained centralised'. Despite not being met, the demands for provincial allocations helped to expose the flaws in the 'participatory planning' system, and initiating conversations on issues affecting the implementation of effective decentralisation. This in turn made way for the piloting of district block grants for councils, alongside institutional development support, through the Pilot District Support Programme (PDSP) in the Midlands province in the late 1980s and early 1990s, an experience that strongly influenced the design of the subsequent national capacity building programmes and decentralisation strategies.

It took an inordinately long time to legislate for the unification of the rural local government system due to resistance from a number of stakeholders. The Rural Councils actively opposed unification as they feared the diversion of resources away from commercial farming area needs to those of communal areas, and the possible loss of their relative autonomy from central government which they had enjoyed since creation in 1966 (Mutizwa-Mangiza, 1990:426). Several sector ministries opposed as they anticipated losing jobs and territorial control to local authorities, and also predicted a fall in standards in the services for which they were responsible on account of perceived low planning and implementing capacities of District Councils. Nonetheless, persistent efforts from the President, the (then) Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development, and from the District Councils themselves through their Association of District Councils, resulted in the passing of the Rural District Councils (RDC) Act in 1988.

The RDC Act of 1988 was a significant commitment in legislative towards decentralisation. Indeed, 'the RDC Act marked and signalled in law, an important attempt to decentralise the system of governance, opening the door to a major shift in the management and provision of local services in rural areas from central to local government' (MLG&NH, 1997:7). In contrast, these same powers, functions and authorities had already been transferred to and implemented by Urban and Rural Councils since independence in 1980.

There were evident hesitations and delays in implementing the RDC Act of 1988. The First Schedule of the RDC Act outlined 64 functions which the RDCs were empowered to assume. These ranged from the provision and maintenance of infrastructure (such as roads, bridges, dams, water, sanitation, and sewage works) to the provision of social services (including health, education, maternity and child welfare, public entertainment), to agricultural and veterinary support services (ranging from cultivation, grazing, animal disease control to marketing services), to responsibility for land planning and allocation and conservation. The implementation of the First Schedule of the RDC Act 1988 became more complex and protracted than the initial listing of functions for transfer from central government to local authorities. The challenges in implementing the RDC Act, were numerous, difficult to resolve and included, inter alia, the need to: establish a

mutually agreed, financial, legal and administrative foundation for decentralisation reflecting high-level consensus, consistency, and commitment; decide which functions will be transferred when and the consequent staffing and financial implications; address fiscal reforms to ensure adequate finances to undertake the decentralised functions; provide for the transfer of relevant staff from central to local government where necessary; define the changing rights, roles, responsibilities and relationships between central government and local authorities with respect to each function; develop appropriate administrative and technical capacities in local authorities as well as in central government support agencies, to efficiently and effectively undertake their respective responsibilities; and resolve contradictions between and within legislation and policies affecting decentralisation.

3. Critical Steps Towards Implementing Decentralisation: The Second Decade 1991 to 2000

At the global level, the demise of USSR and collapse of communism in 1989 left a lot of African countries vulnerable to the influence of the unipolar world led by the western liberal democracies. In response to ever increasing problem of budget deficit, African governments typically adopted structural adjustment programmes chaperoned by the International Financial Institutions with deregulation and decentralisation as some of the conditions. The RDC Act of 1988 lay in abeyance for five years before implementation in 1993. The inordinate delays in implementing the new Act was occasioned by the fact that the proposed substantive transfer of services from central to local government created complexities and challenges that were fairly overwhelming, and precipitated further doubts, fears, and resistance amongst central government ministries, including within the Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development. It was with some sense of trepidation that the Ministry of Local Government, with Swedish support, in 1991 initiated the Forum for Rural Development, with a secretariat based in the ministry (MLGR&UD, 1994:1).

The Forum for Rural Development provided various stakeholders with non-threatening space to converse on issues and concerns as they affected the two types of rural local authorities, and decentralisation initiative in general. The Forum was chaired by the Ministry Local Government, consisted of all

the key ministries, the two rural local authority associations (for Rural and District Councils respectively), and the Provincial Administrators (MLGR&UD, 1994:1). During its three-year lifetime, the Forum served at least four key purposes (MLG&NH, 1998c):

- It provided a relatively safe yet dynamic environment for engagements between 'opposing' stakeholders in the amalgamation and decentralisation exercise in a fashion that demystified contentious issues and assisted in generating some consensus;
- It facilitated a more coherent and committed focus on the numerous unresolved issues delaying implementation of the RDC Act, and placed decentralisation more directly on the national policy agenda, through the commissioning of studies, and sustaining continuing and open debate;
- It facilitated the subsequent merger of Rural and District Councils in 1993, together with the 'unification' of the District Councils Association and the Rural Councils Association into the Association of Rural District Councils;
- It initiated the establishment of the RDC Capacity Building Programme, based on one of its commissioned studies, the Strategic Plan for Capacity Building.

Despite this progress the Forum could not resolve several key policy issues relating to fiscal decentralisation, the timing, pace, and extent of transferring substantive functions from various line ministries to the RDCs. These outstanding issues were not allowed to stall progress of the decentralisation programmes and hence were continually debated and came to be known generically as the "sticky issues". Key stakeholders in implementing the decentralisation process, including both government and donors resolved to proceed on a 'two-pronged' approach that entailed implementing a national RDC Capacity Building Programme (RDCCBP) to enhance the capacities of RDCs, whilst simultaneously addressing the outstanding policy issues. Before the implementation of the RDC Act in 1993, government had in 1990, adopted Bretton Woods institutions inspired and supported economic structural reform programmes (ESAP, followed later by ZIMPREST) altering its development principles, priorities and strategies. ESAP, in the same manner as

all other World Bank inspired economic structural adjustment programmes elsewhere in the developing world of that era resulted in the government's macro policy framework focussing on market liberalization, deregulation, privatisation, reduced public sector spending and civil service reform and rationalisation.

The new macroeconomic policies under ESAP were necessarily neoliberal in nature and reduced dramatically the social service expenditure, sought to roll back the frontiers of the state in service delivery and the thrust towards decentralisation took a different meaning whilst inducing a sense of urgency. Local authorities became critical partners in the new transformation. The socialist informed centrally directed planning of the first decade gave way to 'participation' in development through cost sharing with service users in both rural and urban areas. Central government aimed to reduce the overall budget deficit and hence significantly reduced social spending and direct delivery of services to citizens and in the process placing tremendous pressure on central government to speed up the transfer of functions to local authorities even with evident insufficient capacity by most RDCs to immediately assume additional functions. The RDCCBP implemented in the 57 RDCs from 1996 to 2001 became a catalyst to decentralisation as it sought to address the capacity deficiencies of rural local authorities (MLG&NH, 1998b).

In line with the new ESAP macroeconomic policy, in December 1994, the Civil Service Reform and Rationalisation Programme added spur and impetus to the decentralisation initiatives as Cabinet approved the transfer of functions of primary health care, district hospitals, pre-schools, primary and secondary education, and several aspects of social welfare, to RDCs. It was proposed that a Committee of Experts be established to address the financial policy implications of such wholesale transfer of functions from central to local government. However, the proposed committee was not set and the issue of an appropriate revenue base has remained a perennial challenge. In addition to the local authorities the following key institutional structures were set up to spearhead the decentralisation initiative:

- A Committee of Ministers on Decentralisation;
- A Working Party of Permanent Secretaries on Decentralisation and RDC Capacity Building;

- An inter-ministerial Capacity Building Coordinating Committee (CBCC) with several sub-committees, with responsibility for RDC capacity building and decentralisation;
- A Capacity Building Unit based in Ministry of Local Government and National Housing, as secretariat for the CBCC; and
- Eight Provincial Support Teams facilitating RDC capacity building initiatives with support from Technical Cooperation Expert teams.

The Programme Coordination Management Unit (PCMU) in the Ministry of Local Government and National Housing was also responsible for managing the Urban Sector and Regional Management Project, an urban development project purposed towards building the financial management and technical capacities of within urban local authorities. By 1996, the institutions set up to support decentralisation process assisted central government to reach a consensus regarding general procedures and principles for decentralisation, which were consolidated into 'The Thirteen Principles'. These principles clarified government position on a number of critical issues, and provided a broad framework to guide the more detailed policy, legislative and the development of a comprehensive national decentralisation strategy.

Amongst the most significant general principles delineated in the cluster of 'thirteen' are those that: recognised decentralisation as critical for democracy; defined decentralisation in terms of the permanent legislated transfer of functions and authority from central government to local authorities; and recognized decentralisation as a process and not an event, which required the gradual building up of relevant human, financial and material capacities of local authorities, based on a learning-by-doing approach (MLG&NH, 1998a). The 'thirteen principles' were a product of political and administrative contestations, balancing often contradictory interests constituted a common government position, though they were invariably 'fraught with political compromises', reducing their effectiveness as an instrument to guide a comprehensive decentralisation initiative. Despite that limitation the Principles represented a momentous shift towards clarity and consensus amongst key stakeholders regarding local government reform and decentralisation.

Because the Urban Councils had long achieved many of the critical goals of institutional and political decentralisation which were of main concern to RDCs (Wekwete, 1992:99) the interests and participation levels of the rural versus urban was variegated. Consequently, the rural sector became more engaged in the decentralisation debate. However, the two sectors had common concerns regarding fiscal and financial decentralisation, an area they jointly lobbied. Though nearly self-funding in recurrent budget, Urban Councils depended on central government approvals and grants for capital budget whilst District Councils depended on central government subvention for 80 percent of their overall budgets (Wekwete, 1992:109). As observed by Smoke (2015:101), 'the performance of decentralisation can only be interpreted properly when the factors that shape the formal and informal relationships among differently empowered levels of government is taken into account'.

Guided by 'The Thirteen Principles', at the end of 1996, the CBCC drafted and a Committee of Ministers adopted proposals on 'An Outline of the Decentralisation Implementation Strategy' as the guiding national strategy for implementing decentralisation. The Outline Strategy proposed a three-dimensional approach involving: Acceleration of capacity building of local authorities; Acceleration of the legislated transfer of functions from central government to local authorities; and creation of an enabling environment that facilitates the necessary capacity building and transfer of functions (MLG&NH, 1998a).

Sector ministries were invited to make proposals with respect to each of these different aspects, but were given considerable individual room for manoeuvre. The Outline Decentralisation Strategy suggested, for example, that each ministry should 'select and justify the functions it *wants* to decentralise and those it *wants* to retain and table this information' (MLG&NH, 1998a). This approach was politically necessary in the short term, however, it delayed in resolving fundamental differences and contradictions between sector agencies in their particular approaches to and strategies for decentralisation (MLG&NH, 1998c). Several ministries took up the challenge, to the extent of indicating in principle the functions they could transfer. The Ministries of Health, Education, Transport and Energy, Local Government and National Housing presented comprehensive strategies for the decentralisation of

services to the CBCC. Despite the existence for some time of 'The Thirteen Principles' on decentralisation, agreed at Cabinet level, individual sector ministries struggled with preparing detailed submissions, due in part to the still-unresolved, sticky issues.

The sector ministries justified such delays as occasioned by concerns regarding the insufficient capacity within councils, and the 'questionable calibre' of councillors. Such misgivings, whether based on myth or reality, needed to be deliberated upon. At the same time, consultations at district and community level by ministries Health and Child Welfare and Department of Social Welfare, highlighted the fact that also at sub-national levels, both amongst some councils and some communities, there were fears and uncertainties about the forthcoming changes (DiP, 1998). For example, on account of doubts of Councils' capacities, the Ministry of Education decentralised some function direct to school based School Development Committees bypassing council (Conyers, 2003:117). Indeed, teachers who had been employed by District Councils and paid from government grant through councils successfully lobbied to join the Unified Civil Service on account of inadequate management capacity of most District Councils (Mutizwa-Mangiza, 1992:115). All this required attention to developing far greater levels of awareness and acceptance amongst sector agencies, RDCs and citizens, of the future roles and responsibilities of RDCs, information about the progress being made in RDC capacity building, and a deeper understanding of national policy and legislation on decentralisation.

4. Crises and Erosion of Progress in Decentralisation: The Third Decade 2001 to 2008

In 2000, Zimbabwe's relations with the Bretton Woods Institutions deteriorated due to non-payment of loans and Zimbabwe was no longer able to access lines of credit. The 2000 land reform programme implemented by the Zimbabwe government to take over without compensation white owned farms and redistribute among the black majority drew general condemnation from western countries that withdrew or reduced support to the Government of Zimbabwe. The EU and US subsequently imposed 'targeted' economic and travel sanctions on select individuals and corporates in Zimbabwe.

The local authority capacity building programme in both rural and urban areas came to an end by October 2001 as donors withdrew critical support. The nature and causes of the economic crisis is beyond the scope of this paper but by 2008 Zimbabwe had hyper inflated and both central and local government struggled to deliver even the barest of services (Bland, 2011; Musekiwa, 2012). Financial transfers from central treasury became insignificant over time and ceased during the era of hyperinflation and hence revenue generation by both central and local government was evidently poor (Bland, 2011:340). The main focus became surviving the crisis and, throughout that decade, the momentum and capacity enhancement gained during the first to second decade was severely eroded. In the case study of Binga District, Conyers (2003:117) records an instance after 2000, pump minders were made self-employed without first consulting the council and communities. As the central government became weak and fragile, it developed tendencies to centralise, projecting power through controlling and directing local government operations and generally eroding the gains achieved in decentralisation efforts since independence in 1980.

As in the 1980s era, central government focussed on reconstituting economy, services, and infrastructure. During the GNU era, the centre once again became omnipotent. Central government interfered more with operations of local authorities, occasionally suspending elected officials (Musekiwa, 2012). On the eve of the 2013 general elections, the Minister of local government wrote of all debts owed to councils – a measure that was to financially cripple most councils for the next five years. Indeed, Bland (2011:342) argues that, 'increased centralisations within an increasingly authoritarian regime was the overriding feature of intergovernmental life'. The decline in state capabilities led to the rise of residents' associations demanding and often appropriating powers to make decisions at the local level (Musekiwa & Chatiza, 2015).

5. The Constitutionalisation of Decentralisation and Emergence of Citizen Participation: The Fourth Decade (2009-2019)

Internationally, in the 1980s, decentralisation was a matter of public policy but at the turn of century it had evolved to be an all important issue that is

increasingly attracting constitutional recognition in various jurisdictions. Modern constitutional revisions recognise decentralisation as a key pillar supporting liberal democracy. Decentralisation is no longer the question of 'if necessary' but what form and nature it takes. Social accountability is being entrenched by adoption of integrity institutions. Invariably, since 2000 all countries have adopted some form of Ombudsmen office, anticorruption agency, and reformed national legislatures to enhance their oversight role over the executive. Initially the primary concern was establishing institutions that facilitated public participation in local governance. However, when some minorities and the poor ended up not fully participating the concern shifted to issues of engaging all the stakeholders for maximum involvement.

Bland (2011:340) notes that, 'reeling from the country's 2008 economic crisis, local authorities were operating as best as they could on minimal income and were barely functioning in many areas'. As the country reconstituted its capabilities, local government became a significant instrument for democratic transition (Musekiwa, 2012; Bland, 2011). Following installation of the GNU in February 2009, one agreed function was to generate a new constitution. The constitution committee consulted widely and both urban and rural councils and their associations took the opportunity to push for constitutional recognition of local government. The constitution adopted in 2013 took decentralisation to the frontiers, at least in law. Besides recognising the provincial and local authorities as tiers of government, the new constitution adopts devolution as a guiding framework. The constitution also effectively tackled one of the sticky issues as it is now a constitutional requirement that central Treasury allocates at least five percent of the total annual revenue to sub national level. However, as has been the case in Zimbabwe since 1984, decentralisation has always been advanced in law and policy and very wanting in implementing strategies. As Conyers (2003:115) observes that, 'as is often the case with decentralisation policies, there has been a major gap between rhetoric and reality'.

Six years after the adoption of the constitution, the critical elements of decentralisation in the constitution have not been implemented. The provincial councils have not been established and indeed the ZANU-PF government continued to implement clauses of old constitution by appointing Provincial

Governors, now renamed Minister of State for Provincial Affairs. The functions, location and relations of the Minister of State for Provincial Affairs are the same as those of the disbanded Provincial Governor. Following the forced resignation of long time Zimbabwean ruler, Robert Mugabe and the ascendancy of Mnangagwa, in November 2017, the reshaped ZANU-PF proclaimed a 'new dispensation'. Among other commitments of the new dispensation was the desire to implement devolution as envisioned in the new constitution. Despite commitments by the 'new dispensation', the only significant progress has been budgetary allocation for local governments since 2019 in terms of section 301 of the 2013 constitution. Severe economic decline increased public debt, high inflation, devastation by Cyclone Idai in March 2019, subsequent drought and cereal shortages, and the emergence of the global Covid-19 pandemic in late 2019 all required reassignments of budgetary allocations and dutifully conspired against any significant progress in the decentralisation programme.

Currently the issues of citizen participation and social accountability are at the core of decentralisation philosophy. It is no longer adequate to have decentralised structures that are not accountable to the people. Of late the issues of sustainability are coming on the fore following the adoption of the sustainable development goals.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The decentralisation route in Zimbabwe was complex with central government taking the major role of service delivery during the first decade and in the process undermining local authorities' capacities to assume decentralised functions. The second decade witnessed major shifts in legislation, policy, and practice. However, momentum gathered in decentralised initiatives was lost in the third decade as both central and local authorities struggled to survive with central government often adopting recentralising traits. The fourth decade brought back hope as issues regarding decentralisation were addressed in the 2013 constitution though the necessary clauses have not been implemented. Decentralisation has effectively evolved from being state centric to individual centric to encompassing stakeholders from the state to individual level and environment. The institutions for decentralisation are now taken as given or mandatory and the issue now is processes.

One perennial challenge is that decentralisation is well provided in law but severely lacking in practice. Future decentralisation interventions should address the outstanding financial issues, inadequate local and central government capacity, and political will if decentralisation is to cease to be 'merely ad hoc responses to national crises or departmental priorities' (Conyers, 2003:123).

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