

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE CHALLENGES OF SERVICE DELIVERY: ZIMBABWE IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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*Abstract: It is often the case that local government, its roles and responsibilities, and the challenges it encounters in its effort to fulfill its mandate are often derided, disparaged and conveniently minimised. For purposes of contributing towards the debate on policy review and knowledge generation, the article focuses the spotlight on local government in Zimbabwe, particularly its efforts to marshal communities for socio-economic progress through local public service delivery. In doing so, it turns to the principle of subsidiarity, the theory of local self-governance and document analysis to engage the challenges confronted by local government in Zimbabwe from an evidence-based vantage point, much of it drawn, developed and synthesized from the perspectives of a few representative nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) historically supporting local government regeneration in its various forms in the country. The article finds that the lack of resources and capacity in some local governments to effectively deliver services, the risk of central imposition in local government decision-making and the dearth of public participation processes are some of the challenges limiting the local units of government in Zimbabwe to fulfill their assigned mandate of local public service delivery.*

*Keywords: Local government, challenges, service delivery, subsidiarity, self-local governance, Zimbabwe*

### Introduction

The article assesses the state of local government in Zimbabwe and the challenges local government encounters as it goes about delivering services to communities in line with its mandate. Studies of this nature are important for a few reasons. Firstly, they can help to identify gaps and challenges in local government, which can be addressed through policy and programmatic interventions. Secondly, they can provide a baseline for assessing the progress and impact of interventions over time. Thirdly, they can inform the design of new interventions and programs to strengthen local government. Fourthly, they can contribute to a better understanding of the role of local government in promoting development and improving people's lives. Finally, they can be considered as a valuable contribution to the literature on local government in Zimbabwe and beyond. The findings can be used to inform future studies, as well as the design of local government policies and programs. Additionally, the findings can be compared with other studies on local government in Zimbabwe, the region and elsewhere, which can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing local government.

Local government defined as the level of government that most directly addresses day-to-day issues, represents local customs and cultures and enjoys greater proximity to the people (Marumahoko, 2023a). It is in a unique position to understand and respond to the needs of the community. Local governments were established to provide a range of specific services to a relatively small geographically delineated area in a number of countries, including Brazil, Denmark, France, India, Italy, Japan, Sweden, Australia, and the United States.

They are also established by ordinary legislation of a higher level of central government in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and most countries. They are also established by provincial or state legislation in countries such as Canada and Pakistan. In addition, they are also established by executive order as in the case of China (Shah and Shah, 2006). According to Beaton (2011), the key characteristic of local government is the propinquity of their decision-making bodies to the public, which allows them to accommodate a wide range of local interests and make decisions based on an understanding of the local environment.

There are a number of key characteristics of local government which are outlined in the study by the Zimbabwe Institute (2005). Firstly, it says that local government is a sphere of government, with its own structures, functions and powers. Secondly, it is close to the people, and represents the interests of local communities. Thirdly, it is democratically elected, and accountable to the people it serves. Finally, it has a mandate to provide services to its citizens, and to ensure that their needs are met. It is responsible for a range of essential services, such as waste management, road maintenance, and library services (Marumahoko, 2020a; Ostrom, 2010). In the same spirit it has been observed that local government is an important part of the democratic process, providing opportunities for citizens to participate in decision-making and to hold their representatives accountable.

### **Organisation, Structure and Methodology**

The article flows as follows: introduction, organisation, structure and methodology of the study, problem statement, theoretical considerations, organisation of government in Zimbabwe, constitutionalisation of local government and its implications for local government mandate, the challenges it faces, assessment of local government service delivery efforts, engagement of possible factors undermining service delivery, reflections on prior engagement on the topic of research and concluding remarks. In its engagement, the article mostly relied on document analysis. Document analysis is a valuable research method, and it was found well-suited to the topic of local government and service delivery in Zimbabwe. Some of the advantages of using document analysis include: the ability to access a wide range of data, including historical data that may not be available through other methods, the ability to analyse data from different sources, such as government reports, news articles, and NGO reports to get a more comprehensive view of the topic, and the ability to analyse data in a systematic and consistent manner, which can be useful for identifying trends and patterns. In its engagement, the article largely taps into the perspectives of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) on the state of local government and service delivery in Zimbabwe, for various reasons. The perspectives of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) are often excluded in official government reports analysing local government efforts to spearhead local socio-economic progress and yet NGOs can be invaluable in understanding the state of local government and service delivery in Zimbabwe. Besides supporting local government for many decades in Zimbabwe, NGOs often work directly with communities, and have a unique understanding of the challenges facing them. Additionally, NGOs often have access to data and information that is not available to the government, which can help to identify areas that need improvement. Finally, NGOs can provide a critical perspective on the effectiveness of national and local government policies and programs, as well as recommendations for change.

### *Statement of the problem*

Even as they are at times viewed less favourably, local governments are important institutions created with robust considerations of local communities. The concept of local government enjoys universality and widespread application. As more and more countries seek to connect with local communities, local governments are perceived as the institutions most able to mediate and realise this noble goal. There are number of persuasive reasons why local government is becoming increasingly important in many countries. One of the reasons is that local government is often seen as more responsive and accountable to citizens than central government. This is because local government is closer to the people and is more likely to be aware of and responsive to their needs. Another reason is that local government can be more efficient and effective in delivering services than central government. This is because local government is more familiar with local conditions and can tailor services to meet local needs. An added reason is that many countries have been going through a process of decentralisation, in which power and responsibilities is shifted from central government to local government. In addition, international donors and development agencies have increasingly been supporting local government as a means of achieving sustainable development. Yet another reason is that there is a growing recognition of the role of local government in promoting democracy and good governance. In many countries, including Zimbabwe, local government has taken on a range of roles and responsibilities that were previously the responsibility of the central government. These include: planning and implementing local development goals, providing local services such as water, sanitation, health, education, and social services, planning economic development at the local level, managing local finances and resources, providing support to local businesses and industries, protecting the environment and managing natural resources, representing local communities and ensuring their participation in decision-making, and ensuring compliance with national and international laws and regulations. Even as this was done and celebrated as a major reform of the governmental system, many problems arose that threaten the viability of local government in many countries today. One of the problems that arose from this is that local government did not have the resources or capacity to effectively carry out the responsibilities that had been shifted to them. Without adequate support from national government, local government has struggled to provide the services and support that are needed by communities. This has, in many cases, led to frustration and disillusionment among citizens, who feel that local government is not able to deliver on its promises and govern well in the interest of communities. In some cases, central government appears to have set up local government to fail, for a variety of reasons. In some cases, central governments may want to retain power and control, and therefore deliberately withhold the resources and support that local units of public administration need to succeed. In other cases, central government may simply be unwilling or unable to provide the resources and support that local government needs. Whatever the reasons, this can have a negative impact on the functioning of local government and the ability of local communities to achieve their goals.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

In engaging the topic under scrutiny, the article drew from two theoretical perspectives. These are: the theories of local self-governance and the principle of subsidiarity. Theories

not only offer productive ways to study phenomena in the general domain that it addresses, but they also generate ideas for further inquiry by pointing to other types of phenomena that might be comprehended or described in similar general terms. The theory of local self-governance holds that local communities should have the power to decide on their own affairs and be accountable to their citizens. The most well-known proponent of the theory of local self-governance is the German philosopher, Carl Friedrich (1950). Friedrich argued that the principle of local self-governance was crucial for promoting democracy, citizen participation, and local autonomy. He believed that local governments were better able to make decisions that reflected the needs and interests of local communities, and that they should be given the power to make their own decisions without interference from higher levels of government.

Friedrich's work on local self-governance is closely linked to the issue of local service delivery. He argued that one of the key benefits of local self-governance was that it allowed for more efficient and effective delivery of services at the local level. By giving local communities the power to make their own decisions, they could tailor services to meet their specific needs and priorities. Friedrich believed that this would lead to better outcomes for citizens and a more responsive and accountable system of government. His argument has been supported by a number of other scholars who have also argued that local self-governance is important for improving service delivery. For example, Elinor Ostrom, a Nobel Prize-winning political economist, has argued that local communities are often better at solving collective action problems and providing public goods than central governments. Her other main argument is that polycentric systems of governance, in which multiple centers of decision-making authority exist, are more effective at solving problems and providing public goods than centralised systems. This is because they are more flexible and adaptable, and can respond to local needs more effectively. They are also aware of local needs and are more able to monitor and enforce rules for the provision of services (Ostrom, 1990).

The principle of subsidiarity is closely linked to the theory of local self-governance. The principle of subsidiarity was first articulated in Catholic social teaching by Pope Pius XI in his 1931 encyclical *Quadeagesimo anno*. Since then, it has been widely adopted in Catholic social thought and has been incorporated into the social teachings of other Christian denominations. With respect to local government service delivery, the principle of subsidiarity underscores that local government should be responsible for providing services that are most effectively delivered at the local level (Marumahoko, 2020b). This ensures that local needs are met and that there is accountability to the local community. This is especially relevant in the context of local government service delivery, where services such as health, education and social welfare are often best provided at the local level. The principle of subsidiarity can help to ensure that these services are provided in a way that meets the needs of the local community and is accountable to them. This is closely related to the idea of local self-governance, which argues that local communities should have the power to make decisions about their own affairs (Marumahoko and Nhede, 2021). Both the principles of subsidiarity and the theory of local self-governance emphasize the importance of local control and decision-making. Another way that subsidiarity and local self-governance are connected is through the concept of self-determination. The principle of subsidiarity recognises that individuals and communities have the right to determine their own future and to be involved in decision-making processes that affects their lives.

This is similar to the idea of local self-governance, which also emphasises the importance of self-determination and community involvement in decision-making.

### **The Organisation of Government in Zimbabwe**

With the adoption of Zimbabwe's current constitution in 2013 the prospects for local government to govern local affairs efficiently and effectively markedly improved. For the first time in the history of land-locked southern African country, local government was afforded constitutional protection. The constitution provided for a three-tier system of government comprised of the national government, provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities, divided into urban councils and rural district councils (Section 5 of the Zimbabwe's Constitution). It provides for urban councils to represent and manage the affairs of people in urban areas; and rural councils, to represent and manage the affairs of people in rural areas within the districts into which the provinces are divided. Provincial government is composed of provincial and metropolitan councils.

Briefly, the government of Zimbabwe is divided into three branches: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial. The executive branch is headed by the President, who is both the head of state and the head of government. It also includes cabinet ministers who are appointed by the President and serve at his pleasure. Cabinet ministers are either elected members of the National Assembly, Senate or non-constituency members appointed in line with the constitution. The legislative branch is made up of a bicameral parliament, with the National Assembly and the Senate. Zimbabwe's National Assembly has 270 members, who are elected every five years. Of the 270 members, 210 are elected directly from 210 single-member constituencies, while the remaining 60 are chosen from party lists and allocated proportionally according to each party's share of the national vote. The Senate consists of 80 senators, who are mostly elected through a system of proportional representation. Judicial authority is vested in the courts which comprise the customary law courts, the magistrates courts, the labour court, the high court, the supreme court and the constitutional court.

The composition of provincial and metropolitan councils is slightly different from that of the National Assembly. All members of the national Parliament are now also members of the provincial or metropolitan council in which their constituency is based. Zimbabwe has eight provincial councils corresponding to the country's eight rural provinces and two metropolitan councils, responsible for Harare, the capital and Bulawayo, the second largest city in the country. These councils, eight of which are rural and two are urban, are responsible for a range of functions, including, planning and implementing social and economic development activities, coordinating and implementing government programmes, planning and implementing measures for the conservation, improvement and management of natural resources, promoting tourism and developing facilities for that purpose, and monitoring and evaluating the use of resources. Zimbabwe's 92 local government councils, of which 32 are urban councils, have directly elected councillors. In urban councils, the head of the policymaking function is the mayor while in rural district councils, it is the chairperson. All councillors, including the heads of the policymaking functions are elected after five years and are due for re-election as many times as they are appealing to voters. Local government councils conduct their businesses through a committee system. The head of the administrative arm of council is the town

clerk/secretary in the case of urban councils and chief executive officer in the case of rural district councils.

The Constitution's Section 264 addresses the transfer of authority to local and provincial governments. It declares that if appropriate, government duties and powers must be transferred to those authorities who are qualified to carry them out. This is consistent with the Constitution's section 3(2)(1), which states unequivocally that one of the principles upon which the document is based is the devolution of governmental power. Section 264(2) of the Constitution outlines the objectives of the devolution of government powers and responsibilities to provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities. These are given as follows: to give powers of local governance to the people by enhancing their participation in the exercise of the powers of the state and in making the decisions that affect them, to promote democratic, effective, transparent, accountable and coherent government, to preserve and foster the peace, national unity and the indivisibility of the Republic, to recognise the right of communities to manage their own affairs and to further their development, to ensure the equitable sharing of local and national resources, and to transfer responsibilities and resources from the national government to create sound financial bases for provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities.

The most significant general principles of local government are outlined in Section 265 of the Constitution and include the following: all local authority members must be elected by registered voters in their respective areas; an Act of Parliament must facilitate coordination between the national government, provincial councils, and local authorities; local authorities must ensure good governance, must not exceed their functions, must cooperate with one another, and must ensure the fair and equitable representation of people in their areas. The powers of local authority in Zimbabwe are also outlined in the Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15), the Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:13) and the Regional, Town and Country Planning Act (Chapter 29:12). The three Acts form the principal legislative basis for the implementation of local government policy in Zimbabwe and establish the relationship between local authorities and central government.

### **Did Constitutionalisation Enhance Local Government's Stature?**

At a theoretical level, several arguments can be made about the possible improvements brought about by Zimbabwe's constitutional protection of local government in 2013. In theory, a case can be made that the constitutionalisation of local government has indeed improved its status and capacity to govern local communities. Prior to constitutionalisation, local government was often viewed as a subordinate institution, with little power and authority (Marumahoko and Fessha, 2011). Local government was seen largely as a means of implementing policies from the central government, rather than as a body that could effectively address the needs of local communities (Marumahoko 2010). In this sense, the constitutionalisation has seemingly helped to change this perception, and to establish local government as an institution that can effectively serve the needs of its citizens. It can also be argued that the increased powers and functions given to local government under the current constitution have allowed for a greater level of autonomy and independence. This is particularly evident in the areas of finance and development planning where local government has seemingly been given more freedom to make decisions that reflect the needs of the local community. On the face of it, this has led to a shift from a more centralised system of decision-making to one that is more decentralised and responsive to

local needs. Additionally, it may be argued that the increased accountability and transparency requirements have led to a more effective and efficient use of resources. All in all, the constitutionalisation of local government has seemingly improved the status of the local units of government to facilitate service delivery and governance in local communities in Zimbabwe.

At a practical level, however, it seems to be the case that constitutionalisation is yet to achieve a sea change in the way local authorities have been operating. The situation is largely as it was before. Implementation of devolution has been marked by unexplained delays and the appetite for it is largely lacking. Well over a decade after constitutionalisation of local government, national government has not yet come up with legislation on devolution, although this is specifically called for in the constitution. It continues to use legislation not aligned with the constitution in its interactions with local government. This relates to the Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15) and the Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:13). These are two pieces of legislation it has relied on in the past to confine local government to its position as subordinate to national government. As a result, local government in Zimbabwe continues to be treated as a creature of statute, operating in a delegated capacity and largely dependent on central government; in violation of the constitution. As it was the case before, local government functions, while defined in law, continue to be subjected to central government variation and re-assignment to other national agencies. Using the Urban Councils Act and Rural District Councils Act, Zimbabwe's minister of local government can whittle away local government's autonomy to make decisions (Marumahoko, 2023). The law gives the minister of local government a significant degree of control over local government. This is particularly evident in the areas of finance and development planning, where the minister can override the decisions of local government. This has led to concerns that the autonomy and independence of local government is at risk of being eroded.

### **The Challenges of Local Government in Zimbabwe**

In this segment, the article engages on the challenges (and to a lesser extent, the opportunities) encountered by local government in Zimbabwe as it goes about fulfilling its roles and responsibilities (see Table 1). It does so by drawing from the perspectives of institutions and organisations, some of which have been involved in the ongoing efforts to strengthen the capacity of local government through support and other means. The article proceeds on the basis that there are a number of advantages to examining the opportunities and challenges of local government in Zimbabwe. First, it provides an objective assessment of the state of local government, based on empirical evidence. Second, it identifies specific areas where improvements can be made, and possible solutions that could be implemented. Third, it provides a basis for benchmarking against other countries and assessing the progress of local government reform efforts. Fourth, it can help to generate public discussion and awareness of the importance of local government and the need for reform. All of these advantages can ultimately lead to more effective and responsive local government.

**Table 1: The challenges faced by local government in Zimbabwe**

Organisation	Year	Assessment
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Zimbabwe Institute	2005	The Zimbabwe Institute's study from 2005 identified a number of challenges facing local government in Zimbabwe. Firstly, it noted that the capacity of local government was limited, both in terms of resources and skills. Secondly, it noted that there was a lack of coordination between the central and local government, which impacted service delivery. Thirdly, it highlighted that there was limited participation of citizens in local government, and a lack of accountability. On the positive side, the study noted that there was potential for improved performance if these challenges were addressed. The study was conducted through a combination of methods, including literature review, interviews with stakeholders, focus group discussions, and site visits. Data was also collected from a range of sources, including government ministries, local authorities, NGOs and civil society organisations.
IDAZIM and RTI	2010	In their study, Institute for a Democratic Alternative for Zimbabwe (IDAZIM) and Research Triangle Institute (RTI) (2010) found that the challenges facing local government in Zimbabwe included, limited resources and infrastructure, lack of capacity and skills, limited coordination between central and local government, limited public participation in decision-making, inadequate planning, monitoring and evaluation, inefficient and ineffective service delivery, corruption and political interference.
World Bank	2011	In its report issued in 2011, the World Bank (WB) identifies several key issues facing local government in Zimbabwe. The report notes that the system of decentralisation in Zimbabwe is highly centralised, with most decisions concentrated at the national level. According to the WB, this meant that local authorities have limited autonomy and limited capacity to respond to the needs of their communities. For example, the report notes that local authorities have limited power to raise their own revenue, and must rely on central government for funding. The report notes that the national government allocates insignificant percentage of the national budget to local government and that this is often not enough to meet the needs of local communities. The report also finds that local government is underfunded, both in terms of the amount of money allocated by the central government and in terms of their ability to generate their own revenue. It notes that local authorities have limited ability to raise their own revenue through taxes or fees, as most of the tax base is located in the central government. The WB also found that there is a lack of transparency and accountability in local government in Zimbabwe, which makes it difficult for the public to hold their representatives accountable for the delivery of services. The report also highlights several issues that contribute to this lack of transparency, including a lack of access to information, limited public participation in decision-making, and poor record keeping. This lack of transparency and accountability has reportedly led to poor service delivery, as local authorities are not held to account for their performance. The WB report was prepared at the request of the Government of Zimbabwe, with the goal of providing recommendations to improve local government and service delivery.
World Bank	2011	In its report issued in 2011, the World Bank identified many challenges it say are faced by Harare City Council. Firstly, it noted that the city is facing a serious financial crisis, which has led to a decline in the quality of public services, including water and sanitation, solid waste management, and urban transport. Secondly, it found that the city is facing an infrastructure crisis, with poor roads, inadequate public spaces, and a lack of affordable housing. Thirdly, it found that there is a lack of coordination and collaboration between different levels of government, as well as between different departments within the city council. In the same report, the WB highlights the potential of the City of Harare to leverage its strategic location and role as a regional hub to attract investment and create revenue. Secondly, it underscored that the city has an opportunity to tap into the potential of its informal sector, which provides

		employment and livelihoods for many people. Fourthly, it found that the city has an opportunity to improve its service delivery by strengthening its human resources capacity and increasing its use of technology. Finally, according to the report, the city has the potential to improve its governance by increasing transparency and accountability, and by engaging with the public more effectively.
ActionAid International Zimbabwe	2014	In its briefing paper on local democracy issued in 2014, ActionAid International Zimbabwe highlights a number of challenges and opportunities it says are associated with local government and devolution in Zimbabwe. The report notes that the opportunities associated with devolution, include the potential to improve service delivery, to promote local democracy and to strengthen local government capacity. The report also highlights the potential for devolution to promote greater citizen participation in local decision-making, and to strengthen local economic development. One main point made by the report is that the devolution process in Zimbabwe is still in its early stages, and that there are a number of challenges associated with its implementation. This includes a lack of capacity at the local level, a lack of clear guidelines, and a lack of clarity on the roles of some governmental officials in local government. The report also highlights a number of specific challenges related to devolution, such as the risk of elite capture and the risk of political interference. The report recommends that these risks be addressed through the development of clear guidelines and procedures for devolution, as well as through the strengthening of local governance structures.
ActionAid International Zimbabwe	2014	In its report issued in 2014 on the implementation of devolution in the city of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, ActionAid International found out that Bulawayo City Council had a limited capacity to implement devolution, due to a lack of resources and technical expertise. The case study also identified that there was limited awareness of devolution among the general public, and that there was limited understanding of how devolution could benefit local communities. The report also found that traditional leaders were not always supportive of the devolution process, which could hamper its implementation. On the positive side, the report found that there were some innovative initiatives being undertaken by Bulawayo City Council, such as the establishment of local development committees. In addition, the report also noted that there were opportunities for the city to benefit from devolution, including the potential to improve service delivery and to stimulate economic development. ActionAid used a combination of methods to conduct the case study of Bulawayo. Firstly, it conducted a literature review, which included reviewing existing literature on the topic of devolution in Zimbabwe. Secondly, it conducted semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders, including government officials, civil society representatives and community members. Finally, it conducted focus group discussions with community members.
ActionAid International Zimbabwe	2015	In 2015, ActionAid International also did a case study of the city of Mutare with the purpose of assessing Mutare City Council in its adoption of devolution. As in the cases of Harare and Bulawayo, the report focused on the challenges and opportunities faced by the city council which has a large informal sector. The report found that Mutare was facing a significant challenge in terms of limited revenue generation. This was due to a number of factors, including a high unemployment rate, low levels of business activity, and limited collection of property taxes. Its recommendations on this issue included increasing the collection of property tax, diversifying the economy, and increasing investment in the city. The report also found that the city of Mutare had a limited capacity to implement devolution effectively. This was due to a number of factors, including a lack of staff, insufficient training, and

		a lack of clear guidance from the national government. The report also found that there was a lack of coordination between different departments within the city council, which made it difficult to effectively implement devolution. On the issue of addressing the capacity issues, the report recommends a number of steps. Firstly, it suggested that the city council should prioritise training for its staff, and should seek technical assistance from national government. Secondly, it recommended that the city council should develop a clear strategy for implementing devolution, and should create a system for monitoring and evaluating the process.
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(Source: Author's construct)

### Assessment of Local Service Delivery

A number of organisations have underscored the significance of local government service delivery in their assessments. The OECD or Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017), for example, has highlighted the crucial role that local government plays in service delivery. In its report for 2017, the OECD noted that local government is responsible for providing a wide range of services that are vital for people's quality of life, such as water, sanitation, housing and waste management. It also highlighted the fact that local government is in a unique position to tailor services to the specific needs of local communities. The OECD report found that although, local government service delivery in Europe is generally strong, some local governments in Europe are struggling to deliver services effectively due to factors such as limited financial resources, a lack of capacity, and poor governance. In its assessment of local service delivery in Africa, the World Bank (2017) noted that while some progress has been made in improving service delivery, there are still significant challenges facing local governments in Africa. These are said to include limited financial resources, depleted capacity and weak governance structures. The assessment also highlights that African cities are growing rapidly, but many are struggling to provide basic services such as water, sanitation, and housing. It also notes that local governments in Africa are often under-resourced and lack the capacity to effectively deliver services. In the same breath, the report also notes that there are some promising examples of successful service delivery reforms in African cities, such as the use of technology and the involvement of local communities.

Local government service delivery in Zimbabwe has traditionally been widely accepted by citizens as a key component of the work done by the local units of government to improve the quality of life in communities. This is seemingly the case, even as the subnational government units are accused of stumbling and limping in the course of realising this priority responsibility and goal. Local government's mandate for service provision in Zimbabwe is provided for in Section 71 and 1<sup>st</sup> Schedule to the Rural District Councils' Act (Chapter 29:13), for rural councils, and Section 198 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Schedule to Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15), for urban councils. Provision of water for domestic, commercial or industrial areas, provision of housing and transport facilities, construction and maintenance of drains, sewers, roads and bridges, cleansing and refuse removal and disposal, prevention of air, land and water pollution, operation of fire brigades and municipal police, provision of social services, such as education, health, ambulance services, and provision of recreational facilities and sports facilities, are some of the services provided by local government councils in Zimbabwe. Yet, the RTI International and the (IDAZIM) Institute for a Democratic Alternative for Zimbabwe (2013) describes

service provision among local authorities in Zimbabwe as a “matter of trying to make something of a crisis situation”. Its survey meant to assess the state of service delivery it found that most local officials were well aware of how unsatisfactory service delivery was and when asked to assess it, there was strong agreement that it was either typically poor or fair at best (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Responses to question: How would you describe the state of service delivery today (Percentage of total responses)?**

Service/ Service rating	Health	Education	Transport/ Road	Water and Sanitation	Housing
Excellent	3.3	2.7	1.6	3.8	0.5
Good	18.7	9.9	7.1	7.7	9.9
Fair	41.8	33.5	23.1	24.2	41.2
Poor	30.2	42.3	53.3	54.4	36.3
Non-existent	1.1	2.2	4.9	2.2	1.6
DK/ NA	4.9	9.3	9.9	7.7	10.4
Total	100.00	99.9	99.9	100.00	99.9

Note: N=182 and include only the councillors from 12 local authorities. DK/NA= Respondents who did not know or did not answer the question. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding off.

(Source: RTI International and the IDAZIM, 2013, p. 49)

The Centre for Community Development of Zimbabwe (2009) determined that in addition to a lack of resources, a number of intricately linked issues also have a role in the poor level of service delivery. It became clear from its work with various Zimbabwean rural and urban councils that major obstacles to providing effective services also include, but are not limited to, a lack of knowledge and capacity, gender inequality, a lack of transparency, corruption and the abuse of power, and power struggles between locally elected council members and the bureaucrats. In a similar vein, it also associates political pressure and intervention from the national government, disagreements between council members with disparate political histories, misaligned priorities, and conflicts of interest between private benefit and the public good, with disparities in service delivery. It also noted that a number of administrative and logistical challenges, such as a lack of service vehicles, machinery, and equipment, deteriorating infrastructure, and the inability to pay salaries, characterize Zimbabwe's state of service delivery.

### **The Case of Water Provision, Wastewater Management and Road Infrastructure Development**

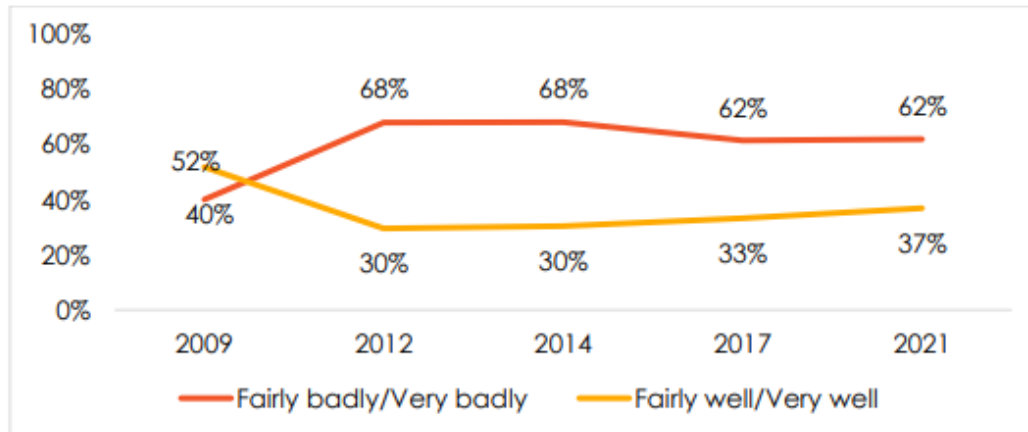
In the forthcoming paragraphs, the article assesses three of the many local public services that are the responsibility of local government. These are: (a) water provision, (b) wastewater management, and, (c) road infrastructure development. Given that it is not possible to engage all the services under the portfolio of local government, owing to time and space constraints, the assessment was confined to the three mentioned above. By any means, this does not in any way suggest that the other services not assessed are of less significance and standing in the family of services legally assigned local government in Zimbabwe.

#### *Water supply*

It is on record that local government's infrastructure for water supply has been under severe strain for many years. Among others, this is characterised by communities complaining that they are going for lengthy periods of time without clean drinking water. In some local authorities the situation is so bad that entire communities have endured months, even years without accessing portable water. In 2019, the African Development Bank (ADB) estimated the cost of expanding (and not rehabilitating) access to improved water provision at about US\$504.6 million. Estimates by the Urban Councils Association of Zimbabwe (UCAZ, 2020) point to local authorities requiring at least US\$304.1 million to finance infrastructure for water supply for urban areas. The estimate does not even include the cost of replacing broken down water pipes and related components, which could drive the cost even higher than the estimate by the Urban Councils Association of Zimbabwe (2018). In 2022, one study estimated the cost of revamping Harare City Council's water infrastructure to be one billion US dollars for five years (Marumahoko, 2022).

Against this back, the assessment by Urban Councils Association of Zimbabwe is not only seemingly conservative but it also appears to minimise the incapacity by a considerable margin (see Figure 1). The estimate by the Urban Councils Association of Zimbabwe also excludes infrastructure for water supply by rural district councils, which have suffered under-funding for many years. The African Development Bank (2019) claims that because of protracted underfunding, Zimbabwe's urban water and wastewater treatment facilities are inefficient, allowing raw sewage and effluent to seep into rivers and dams. According to the World Bank Service Level Benchmarking Coordination Committee (2016), a number of factors, including limited revenue inflows, increased demand for services due to population growth, low levels of investment in local government infrastructure maintenance, aging infrastructure and equipment, the impact of hyperinflation and dollarisation, which had contributed to the dissolution of some transfer and loan facilities that had traditionally supported investments at the local level, inadequate treatment capacity, inadequate metering, inadequate policies, and infrastructure vandalism, were identified as contributing to the challenges faced by local government councils in Zimbabwe when it comes to providing portable water. These difficulties can be ascribed to several factors. This involves residents not paying for the services they receive, which leaves them with enormous debts that are unlikely to be paid back. Writing for the Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Unit, Dube (2019) identifies two reasons for the nonpayment of local services by citizens: incapacity and unwillingness. It is assessed that the primary cause of unwillingness is the inability of local authorities to provide services, which deters ratepayers from being prepared to pay for services that do not exist. Because of this, consumers do not give rate payment much importance, even though they can still find a means to pay for other services either directly or indirectly, through taxes. Examples of such services include education, public transportation, recreation facilities, security, and parking. The Zimbabwean national government's prohibition on local councils using effective water price strategies is likewise not very helpful. If the neoliberal principles of liberalization, deregulation, and cost recovery governed local water supply policy, it would seemingly benefit financially stressed local government councils (Marumahoko, 2020c).

**Figure 1: Response to the question: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: providing water and sanitation?**



(Source: Afrobarometer, 2021, p. 5)

### *Wastewater issues*

An acceptable sanitation system is one that provides safe and effective access to sanitation facilities for all people, while also protecting the environment. This includes access to safe toilets and latrines, as well as the safe collection and treatment of human waste. An acceptable sanitation system should also be affordable, easy to use, and accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities. It should also be culturally appropriate and take into account local customs and traditions. In addition, it should be sustainable, ensuring that it can continue to operate effectively over the long term. In urban Zimbabwe, all households are issued with an occupation certificate by local government councils to effectively manage wastewater. The issuance of occupation certificates is part of the country's efforts to improve sanitation and protect public health. The certificates are issued by the local authorities and require property owners to provide an adequate sanitation system, such as a septic tank or a connection to a municipal sewer system.

By requiring these certificates, the government is able to ensure that all households have access to safe and effective sanitation, reducing the risk of waterborne diseases and environmental pollution. Even with policies like the occupation certificates in place, the maintenance of wastewater infrastructure is a major challenge for local authorities in Zimbabwe. This is due to a variety of factors, including a lack of funding, inadequate technical capacity, and a lack of political will. Added to this is that population growth is expanding at a bigger pace in relation to the capacity of the sanitation system. The case of the city of Harare can illustrate this point better. The city's wastewater treatment system was originally designed for only 250,000 people, but the city's current population is ten times that number. Large amounts of improperly treated wastewater are being released into rivers as a result of the system's inability to handle the 60 million liters of sewage that are produced every day (Chirisa et al, 2017).

The World Bank Service Level Benchmarking Coordination Committee (2019), established in 2019 that about 14.2% of the toilets were not functional in the local authorities. It also established that only about 20.5% of the total wastewater infrastructure across all the urban local authorities in Zimbabwe can be regarded as being of high quality, against a benchmark of 100% functionality. It was also established that the sewer charge

collection efficiency is low; it is estimated at an average of 30.6% across all the local authorities (Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Unit, 2019). As if this is not already bad enough, informal settlements make it worse as they often lack proper sanitation facilities, and their inhabitants often lack access to clean water and proper waste disposal. Untreated wastewater from these illegal settlements and industries often enter public water bodies, polluting water for human consumption and other species. This is leading to serious health risks and environmental degradation. In addition, the lack of formal recognition and planning for informal settlements makes it difficult for local governments to effectively manage them.

### *Road infrastructure*

In Zimbabwe, there are four road authorities: the national government, local government councils (divided into urban councils and rural district councils), provincial governments, and the Zimbabwe National Roads Administration (ZINARA). The local government councils are responsible for managing the road network within their jurisdiction, including the construction, maintenance and rehabilitation of roads. This can be a major challenge as local governments often lack the resources and capacity to effectively manage their road network. The term 'road authority' is used to describe an entity that is legally responsible for the planning, construction and maintenance of roads in a particular jurisdiction. The national government is responsible for the planning, construction and maintenance of all national roads connecting two or more provinces. It also has the authority to designate roads as national roads and to set standards for their construction and maintenance. In doing so, it works closely with other road authorities to ensure that the country's road network is safe, efficient and well-maintained. The ZINARA, or Zimbabwe National Roads Administration, is a parastatal responsible for the management and administration of the National Road Fund. The National Road Fund is a fund that is used to finance the construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of national roads in Zimbabwe. It collects road user charges, such as tolls and fuel levies, which are then used to fund road projects. These are functions it arbitrarily took away from local authorities; thereby affecting their capacity to provide for local road networks.

The state of road infrastructure in local government jurisdictions has consistently been described as extremely poor (Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Unit, 2019). To get a perspective, picture this: in its survey done in 2019, the World Bank Service Level Benchmarking Coordination Committee found that, only 52% of road in urban councils are sealed and that of these, only 21.2% are in good condition. In the same vein, the survey also established that only 10% of roads in urban councils have carriage markings and that only 16.9% have controlled intersections. Poor infrastructure in local authorities does not augur well with an economy trying to achieve sustained economic growth. Such a state of affairs does not speak to the ability of local government to supply essential infrastructure services that support private economic output and improve socio-economic development at the local level where communities are found (Marumahoko, 2023b).

Among others, Marumahoko (2020c) seemingly attributes the decline of local authorities as road authorities to the actions by ZINARA. He argues that up until 2009, using vehicle license fees, urban councils, for example, supported efficient, reliable, and safe road infrastructure services. After vehicle licensing was removed from local councils and given to ZINARA, a state-owned enterprise created by national government, the capacity of

urban councils to invest in the urban road network system suffered decline and has not recovered ever since. Harare mayor, Jacob Mafume, seemingly aligns with Marumahoko's assessment. On 16 January 2024, Mayor Mafume said that the City of Harare was in the grip of a road maintenance funding dilemma as the ZINARA was channeling a mere US\$2 million of the staggering US\$64 million contributed annually by the city's 800,000 registered vehicles (Zimeye, 2024). The pittance payment to Harare City Council constitutes a paltry 3% of the colossal sum amassed from Harare motorists. The funding model described by Mayor Mafume as "daylight robbery" is accused of "leaving Harare drowning in neglected infrastructure". A dire picture of the state of road infrastructure in local authorities becomes clearer when one takes into consideration the deprivation suffered by Zimbabwe's other 91 local government councils as a result of the national government taking away this stream of revenue from local authorities and bestowing it on ZINARA, a parastatal controlled by the centre and whose funding model bears considerable blame for the deterioration of local government road infrastructure.

### **The Factors that Service Consumers' Perceive for Poor Service Delivery**

Research done by Marumahoko et al (2020) may be applicable in the current engagement. Among others, the researchers sought service consumers' perception of the origins of poor local government service delivery in Zimbabwe. In seeking to provide valuable insight into the state of local government service delivery, the researchers asked the service users to shed light on the causes of poor service delivery. The objective which is comparable for the current discussion, was to gain more insight into the challenges encountered in decentralising service provision as well as to facilitate comparative observation and improve policy formulation and analysis. Declining public sector investment, waning donor funding, misuse of council funds, a lack of public participation, a lack of political leadership, poor policies, poor budgeting and monitoring and evaluation, were cited by respondents' as some of the key drivers of inadequate service provision (see Table 3). These perceptions suggest that there are significant challenges facing local government in Zimbabwe, and that a more systematic approach in addressing these challenges is needed.

**Table 3: Percentage distribution of service consumers' perception of the origins of poor service delivery**

	Bulawayo	Chitungwiza	Zvishavane	Epworth
Limited local government reforms	50	40	30	40
Centre-local power struggles	60	40	50	60
Politicisation of service delivery	60	70	60	50
Limited and insecure revenue	70	60	50	80
Limited expenditure powers	40	30	60	50
The 'unfunded' mandate	100	90	100	80
Obsolete service delivery infrastructure	80	100	90	90
Declining public sector investment	100	90	80	100
Declining donor funding	100	100	100	100
National government debt	100	90	70	100
Corruption in staffing	80	100	100	60
Lack of managerial capacity	90	100	100	60
Lack of transparency and accountability	60	90	100	40
Lack of training and capacity building	30	40	20	30
Misuse of council funds	100	100	100	60

Lack of public participation	90	100	80	70
Poor coordination processes	100	100	90	80
Poor monitoring and evaluation	100	100	90	100
Lack of political leadership	90	100	100	70
Poor intergovernmental coordination	60	80	50	40
Poor service delivery policies	100	90	100	60
Poor budgeting	30	70	80	40

Source: Marumahoko et al., 2020, pp. 62-63

### What Does All of the Above Tell Us?

If anything, the engagements above underscore that Zimbabwe has a vibrant system of local government in place. They seemingly highlight that a few features characterise the vibrant system of local government in Zimbabwe: the Constitution of Zimbabwe explicitly recognises the existence of local government and defines its structure and functions, to some extent, there is a discernible system of decentralisation, with roles and responsibilities of national government, provincial governments and local governments outlined, local governments enjoy some autonomy in making decisions that affect their areas, there are mechanisms for citizen participation in local government decision-making, such as through elections and community meetings and local governments have systems and procedures in place for delivering local services. Despite existence of a system in place, there are a number of challenges seemingly stifling robust local governance highlighted in the engagements that need to be addressed. They include, inadequate resources, limited intergovernmental coordination, inadequate planning, unnecessary encroachment by national government, and a limited capacity to implement devolution and programs and projects that benefit the socio-economic progress of communities. The article engaged three of many critical issues at the heart of vibrant local government service delivery: water supply, wastewater management and road infrastructure planning, development and maintenance. In so doing, the research seemingly added value by further exploring aspects of the question asked by RTI International and IDAZIM, a little over a decade ago: *What are the three most important services the council is providing to the community?* (see Table 4). Among others, improving the capacity of local government to deliver local public services in Zimbabwe, may entail the need for greater financial autonomy for local government, the necessity for more capacity-building programs to equip local government with the skills and resources they need to effectively deliver services, development of service delivery systems anchored by cost recovery philosophy, and the need for local authorities and local residents to reconnect on all fronts.

**Table 4. Response to question: What are the three most important services the council is providing to the community?**

Number of times mentioned among top three (percentage of N)				
Local officials	Water and sanitation	Refuse collection	Road maintenance	Primary health care
Mayors/Chairs (N=14)	8 (57.1)	10 (71.4)	n.a.	7 (50.0)
Administration officials (N=15)	14 (93.3)	n.a.	5 (33.3)	11 (78.6)
Councilors (N=194)	103 (53.1)	n.a.	64 (33.0)	97 (50.0)

Totals (N=223)	125 (56.1)	10 (4.5)	69 (30.9)	115 (51.6)
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Note: Administration officials, interviewed as a group, include the town clerks, heads of department, and other officials, and the composition of the group varied by local authority.

N = Total number of survey respondents

n.a. = not applicable; issue was not mentioned among top three

Source: *RTI International and the IDAZIM, 2013, pp. 52*

## **Conclusion**

The article focused on local government in Zimbabwe, and highlighted the challenges (and to a lesser extent the opportunities) facing local government in the country. Among others, it engaged on the opportunities for local government to play a greater role in service delivery, economic development and local democracy. It also engaged on the challenges that local government faces, including financial constraints, a lack of capacity, and a lack of public support. Finally it provided recommendations for addressing these challenges and strengthening local government in Zimbabwe. Increasing financial autonomy for local government, through measures such as increasing local revenue sources and implementing more transparent and accountable financial management, strengthening capacity building efforts for local government officials, such as training and capacity building programs, increasing community participation in local government, through initiatives such as local forums, public hearings, and community consultations, and enhancing coordination and cooperation between different levels of government, as well as with other stakeholders such as civil society organisations and the private sector, were some of the recommendations it proposed. In its engagement, the article was guided by the principles of subsidiarity, the theory of local self-governance and document analysis, in the form of reviewing published sources of data such as government databases, internet searches, yearly reports, journals, periodicals, annual reports, books, and articles. In its analysis of the state of local government and service delivery in Zimbabwe, the article drew mostly from the perspectives of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), all of which have a rich history of actively supporting local government capacity building in the country in one form or another.

The article began its effort of rigorous analysis with introduction, followed by organisation, structure and methodology of the study, statement of the problem, organisation of government in Zimbabwe, constitutionalisation of local government, opportunities and challenges of local government, and assessment of local government service delivery. In doing so, it specifically gave prominent attention to analysis of local government efforts in the provision of water supply, wastewater management and road infrastructure planning, development, construction and maintenance. The objective was to sample a few services to assess success of local government in the delivery of basic services. The three services analytically engaged in greater detail (i.e. water supply, wastewater management and road infrastructure) are part of a family of services considered critical by communities and therefore worthy of consideration. The article also engaged on the factors perceived of by communities as being the root causes of poor and dysfunctional local public service delivery. Following this, it reflected on its prior discussions. In doing so, it was proceeding on the basis that reflecting on prior discussions in an academic and professional paper is a valuable process, as it can help to highlight prominent themes that emerged from the discussions. By analysing the themes, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. This process can also help to identify gaps in knowledge or areas that

require further exploration. The article then presented its concluding remarks. There are a number of areas that future studies could focus on to further explore the knowledge generated in this article. One possible area of engagement for future studies is examining the different approaches to service delivery being used in Zimbabwe (and perhaps beyond) by different local governments, and assessing their effectiveness.

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