Framework for Enhancing Local Participation for Planning and Devolution in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe calls for devolution as a way to strengthen local governance through transfers of resources and citizen participation, but implementation shows that devolution is superficial and that central control remains strong and citizens are excluded. Incomplete buildings and budget constraints are a problem for local authorities, which have limited ability to effectively meet the needs of grassroots development. This is a qualitative study which examines the way forward for enhancing local participation and devolution in Zimbabwean contexts such as Murewa District, to bridge the gap between policy intentions and implementation. Data were collected using qualitative desktop research of peer-reviewed articles, government reports and grey literature from Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science with the keywords that included *devolution, Zimbabwe, challenges, citizen participation* and *local governance*. The study uses textual analysis as a method for data analysis in synthesising empirical findings and theoretical frameworks. The analysis found that there is an absence of a detailed statutory framework, which results in uneven devolution and central dominance; there are incomplete provincial and district structures and the institutional capacity of these structures is weak, limiting local autonomy; and citizen participation is limited due to top-down planning, political manipulation and insufficient fiscal empowerment. The findings suggest that policymakers enact a comprehensive Devolution Act, institutionalise participatory mechanisms and ensure unconditional fiscal transfers to bridge the policy-practice gap. This model offers a roadmap for sustainable local governance, fostering accountability and equitable development across Zimbabwe's rural and urban divides.

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INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe's constitutional mandate for devolution stipulates that at least 5% of the national income must be allocated to local governments, signalling an official commitment to decentralising power and resources (Wekwete and Shoko, 2026). However, these formal arrangements have been largely symbolic and significant financial powers and decision-making authority have remained with the central government. This imbalance is a long-standing policy implementation deficit which hinders the benefits of decentralisation at the grassroots and weakens the capacity of local government to effectively address community needs. The gap between policy and practice is not specific to Zimbabwe, but is well demonstrated from other contexts that successful devolution is dependent on the delegation of real decision-making power, resources and accountability mechanisms to local institutions, which will then focus on and provide local services efficiently (Dick-Sagoe, 2020; Ibrahim, 2024). In this context, it is becoming clear that Zimbabwe needs a clear and binding framework which can provide the basis for effective devolution, allowing local governments to have real autonomy and power.

There are several challenges to local participation and devolution in Zimbabwe, including structural, institutional and socio-political ones. Literature indicates that the involvement of citizens in local government is constrained due to top-down planning processes and the marginalisation of these communities (Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). A study by the same authors reveals that 50% of the people of Murehwa District, Zimbabwe, remain excluded from local development planning due to politics and a lack of empowerment. These are generalised findings for the situation in Africa as revealed by other findings in different studies that have identified elite capture, inadequate institutional capacity and lack of genuine participation as major causes (Makara, 2018; Rugeiyamu and Msendo, 2025). Most importantly, empowerment is not limited to formal structures, it needs to be created through education, leadership development and participatory fora that can enable marginalised groups to become self-determining agents of their own development (Ahmad and Talib, 2014). Therefore, strengthening local participation requires strategies that tackle institutional reforms and socio-political inclusion.

The lessons from decentralised governance experiences in other developing countries also help to shed light on the conditions under which devolution is effective. According to Frumence *et al*. (2013), the health sector in Tanzania showed that there is no autonomy in the health sector which can be improved by resource mobilisation and planning. The study found that the exclusion of communities in decision-making was among other factors that caused failure. Similarly, local health boards entrepreneurship and clientele in the Philippines show that while formal attempts to decentralise authority have been made, problems in terms of awareness on the part of citizens and the presence of socio-cultural factors bearing the legacy of centralised governance, are holding back the extent of citizen empowerment and participation in governance (Ramiro *et al*., 2001; Manuel and Cruz, 2026). The findings in these studies show that decentralisation will not work on its own as it should be accompanied by capacity building, transparency and participatory mechanisms. They emphasise the need for Zimbabwe's decentralisation policy to include these factors on a multi-dimensional basis to drive a wedge between the policy's legal requirements and its actual impact. The article then delves into the conceptual structure that will help to explain the basis for local participation and devolution. A critical review on the literature follows examining the knowledge gained to date and identifying known challenges and difficulties in implementing the topic through an investigation of current research. These include explaining the methodology employed in the study, including the research design and data collection techniques. The findings section then presents empirical findings from the context of Zimbabwe, followed by analysis and interpretation in the discussion. The article ends with recommendations which seek to enhance local participation and effective devolution to support policy discussions and practice in Zimbabwe's governance landscape.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Devolution is decentralisation in which political, administrative and fiscal power is devolved to lower levels of government, such as the province and local government. It is primarily designed to improve the quality of local government, service delivery and to promote citizen participation in decision-making. Devolution in Zimbabwe is the devolution of power and resources from the central government to the provinces and local communities to enable the communities to identify and implement development projects that are relevant to their needs. It has been shown that decentralisation can enhance accountability and efficiency by being closer to the people in Sub-Saharan Africa (Zon *et al*., 2017).Active involvement of the locals is an important ingredient of effective devolution. Devoid of meaningful participation of communities in planning and budgeting, decentralisation is likely to be a top-down process repeated at the lower levels. Studies show that devolution opens up space to interact with the community, yet the space is not always realised in practice because of poor institutional structures and the scanty local capacity (Tsofa *et al*., 2017).

In Zimbabwe, decentralisation and devolution are a complex terrain in which desired governance outcomes (increased local participation, accountability and development) are not always achieved. Although decentralisation is often touted as a tool for proximity to the people, responsiveness and inclusive development, the empirical evidence has shown that there is a significant policy-practice gap in Zimbabwe. Such a gap is defined by an institutional weakness at the local government level, limited capacities, political capture and control, and weak local institutions, and thereby weak popular empowerment, undermining effective devolution (Conyers, 2003; Makara, 2018). Empirical evidence outlined in the theoretical contributions shows that devolution has gained significance for its positive effects in a situation where the local government is autonomous, has adequate finance and the institution has the capacity to effectively use devolved powers (Olowu, 2003; Frumence *et al*., 2013). If these enabling factors are excluded, decentralisation will remain on paper that will continue to be constrained by centralised governance, dominated by the elite, which may weaken accountability and the involvement of citizens in decision-making (Ribot, 1999; Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). As a consequence, policy implementation gaps in Zimbabwe must be addressed by strengthening institutional quality, increasing fiscal decentralisation and increasing the ability of marginalised groups to be actively involved in the aspect of local planning and decision-making through inclusive policy implementation mechanisms.

Based on the literature reviewed, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for enhancing local participation in planning and devolution in Zimbabwe. The framework illustrates the interaction between institutional capacity, political commitment, fiscal decentralisation and citizen empowerment as the key drivers of effective local participation. These factors collectively influence participatory planning, accountability and inclusive local development, while feedback mechanisms ensure continuous improvement and responsiveness to community needs.

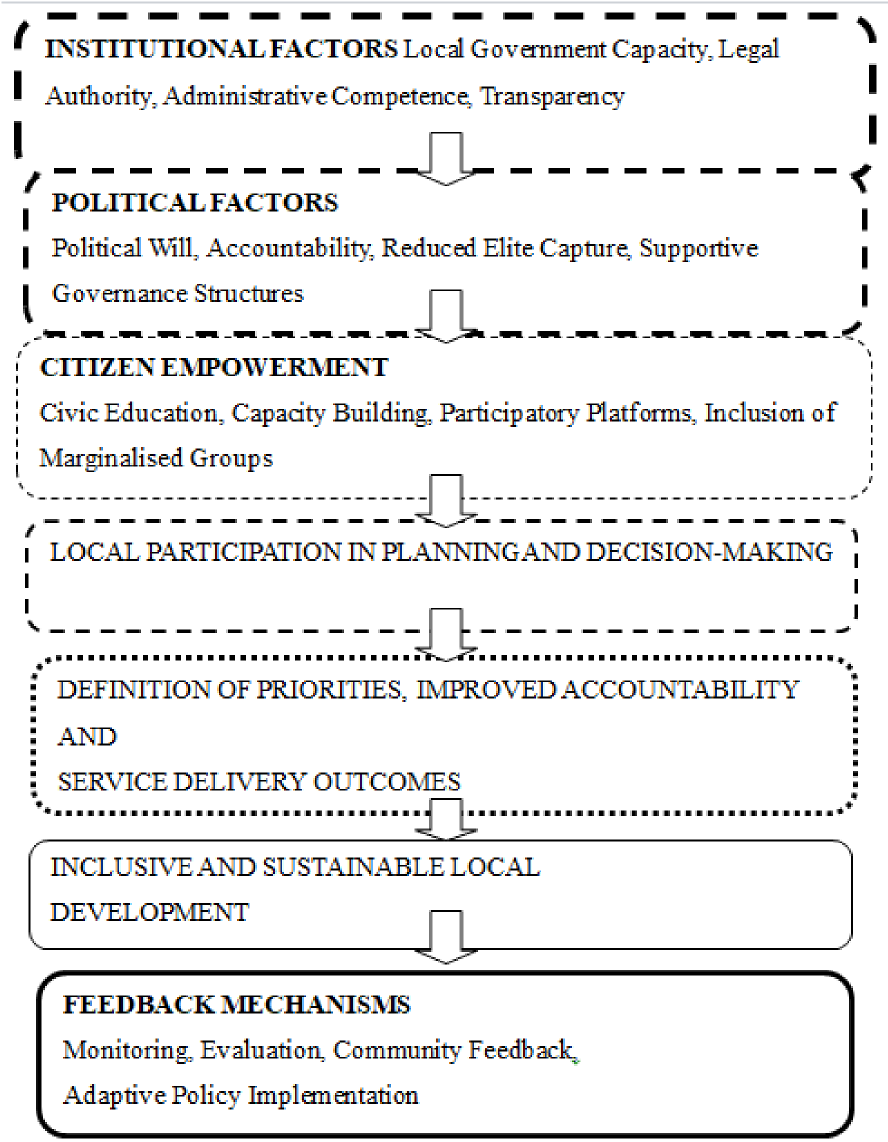

Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework for enhancing local participation for planning and devolution in Zimbabwe*

Given this knowledge, the institutional, political and citizen empowerment nexus needs to be paramount in any framework for improving local participation for planning and devolution in Zimbabwe. As illustrated in Figure 1, the proposed conceptual framework integrates institutional capacity, political commitment, fiscal decentralisation and citizen empowerment as interconnected determinants of effective local participation in planning and devolution. Central to this model is the recognition that effective devolution hinges on legally entrenched authority for local governments, transparent and predictable fiscal transfers and the development of managerial competencies within local administrations (Makara, 2018; Fenuku, 2024). To address this, socio-political barriers that exclude the involvement of citizens should be dealt with (Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). Empowerment programmes, such as civic education, internal capacity-building and development of participatory fora, can ensure that the goals for development are set in line with the priorities of communities and give communities a voice in holding decision-makers to account (Ahmad and Talib, 2014; Dushkova and Ivlieva, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literature associated with the study. This includes citizen participation in local governance and planning, economic impacts of devolution on local development and opportunities and challenges of devolution in rural and urban contexts.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND PLANNING

Citizen participation is an integral part of good governance and planning at local level, especially in the context of devolution. But, in real-world scenarios, there are often important disconnects between what is desired in terms of inclusive participation and what actually happens. For example, research in the Murewa District in Zimbabwe has shown that more than half of local citizens believe that they are excluded from local development planning processes and that processes of decision-making accord disproportionate importance to the voice of the top-down and neglect the voice of the bottom-up (Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). This exclusion is seen in political manipulation of planning meetings, which reduces trust and real community participation. More general empirical research in other settings confirms that the effective participation of local populations does not automatically follow from decentralisation, but that social capital, empowerment and institutional openness, are important factors in determining whether local populations can participate meaningfully (Aulich, 2009; Häikiö, 2012; Chen *et al*., 2025). Furthermore, the continued dominance of the elite and the centralised control hinders the devolution of power, reducing opportunities for communities to participate in decision-making that impacts their livelihoods (Naul *et al*., 2025). Thus, structural and cultural obstacles in governance systems need to be addressed to improve local participation, if reforms are to achieve this.

South African studies identified barriers that include lack of literacy, inequalities and lack of trust among the citizens and the government as the ones that reduce effectiveness of participatory planning though good legal frameworks exist (Ndlovu and Muringa, 2025). Likewise, research on the decentralisation processes in Uganda shows that formal powers and functions are decentralised on paper, but in practice the support for community resource mobilisation, accountability requirements and political independence are still low, resulting in “recentralisation” de facto and reduced community ownership (Kakumba, 2010; Lamidi *et al*., 2025). A successful engagement will, therefore, require strengthening of citizens' capacities and agency, and strengthening of governance institutions to be more transparent, accountable and inclusive. This encompasses civic education, political leadership development and establishment of community-based organisations for effective advocacy at a local level (Ahmad and Talib, 2014; Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). This holistic process can unleash the potential of devolution to enable sustainable and inclusive locally led development.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF DEVOLUTION ON LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

The argument for decentralisation and devolution is that it empowers subnational governments with greater autonomy to be the drivers of local economic growth and improve livelihoods. But there are indications that economic results of devolution are not uniform and that the extent of devolution, rather than its form, has a strong influence on the outcomes, depending on the institutional quality and fiscal autonomy of local governments. According to Li *et al*. (2023), devolution can stimulate growth of the local economy, engendering trade-offs, exclusion of long-term sustainability and management of the environment. This implies that there can be conflicts with opportunities offered to local actors for short term economic gain and the broader sustainable development goals (Chen *et al*., 2022; Wang *et al*., 2022). Fiscal capacity and adverse institutional governance, largely due to the quality of institutions delivering decentralised functions, also play significant roles for devolution to be effective in achieving positive economic outcomes, as R&D (Bahasoan *et al*., 2025), demonstrate. Findings in literature highlight the importance of a robust legal framework, which when not available, will cause devolution to perpetuate lack of autonomy which will obstruct local development rather than to enhance it. This underscores the need for fiscal transfers that are specific to strengthen local developmental functions while at the same time holding them to account. The literature reviewed indicates that, apart from legal decentralisation, attention needs to be given to enhancing the capacity of local institutions and their fiscal independence to enable them to effectively implement economic development and ensure environmental sustainability in the country (Hunjra, 2023).

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF DEVOLUTION IN RURAL AND URBAN CONTEXTS

The challenge of devolution is a complex one with varying opportunities and problems in rural and urban settings in Zimbabwe. Devolution can, on one hand, lead to better resource allocation, better democratic governance and more local autonomy, which can facilitate local authorities to develop their initiatives according to the needs of the community. Theoretically, this localised control helps to create more responsive and accountable governance which enhances equity in socio-economic development (Makara, 2018; Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). Systemic challenges like corruption, lack of institutional capacity and low participation by the marginalised work as impediments to effective governance structures (Ribot, 1999; Frumence *et al*., 2013; Pacheco-Jaramillo and Malliaros, 2025). In addition to this, studies in other African countries show that decentralisation can unintentionally remove power from local actors like traditional leaders, thereby creating new forms of exclusion and marginalisation (Chen *et al*., 2021). This calls for the creation of robust legal frameworks that should guide devolution in the country.

Devolution in the Zimbabwean service delivery sector has shown mixed outcomes. Bhanye *et al*. (2023) and Maphosa and Moyo (2024) concur that local authorities in Zimbabwe have gained administrative governance, but continue to struggle with resource constraints and politicised governance that restrict planning and engagement. The most excluded areas in formal planning are the urban informal settlements, a situation that causes the spread of inequalities and ineffectiveness of participatory planning (Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). On the other hand, rural areas have problems associated with low fiscal autonomy and capacity and traditional authorities and the local elite who could be opposed to the process of democratisation (Trefon, 2009; Nuhu, 2018; Heinze, 2025). Combined with informal governance arrangements, formal decentralised structures result in fuzzy institutional environments and the difficulty of promoting inclusive and accountable local governance, spanning rural-urban divides. Strategies that can overcome these dichotomous experiences will need to be integrated, strengthening institutional capacity, while encouraging meaningful participation from citizens and resolving tensions between formal and informal authorities.

METHODOLOGY

The information required for review of literature on how to increase local participation in planning and devolution in Zimbabwe was retrieved from electronic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science and Science Direct. Data were searched using a variety of terms such as *local participation. Zimbabwe, devolution planning Africa, citizen participation local governance, decentralisation Zimbabwe challenges, empirical studies devolution Sub-Saharan Africa* and *fiscal decentralisation local development*, either singly or in combination. Peer-reviewed journal articles based on empirical data were prioritised for reliability of findings. The article is based on English published sources related to this topic. No limit was set on the years of the items searched from published articles. Published sources generated from the search process were further filtered based on their relevance, to formulate those that are relevant and most appropriate to the article. Government reports from the Zimbabwean Constitution and the Ministry of Local Government, and publications from the World Bank, UNDP and other grey literature, were consulted for the article. As such, the article is based on the assessment of existing reports and claims, rather than fresh empirical data from the field.

Specific case studies and theories were searched to supplement the comprehensive search. These fine questions have focused the identification of important empirical literature that was then cross-checked for methodological quality. Academic literature was supplemented by grey literature that was made available from African Union reports on decentralisation and IMF working papers on fiscal devolution, which gave these documents a contextual enriching quality. The sources were appraised based on the following criteria: the source is as recent as possible; the author has relevant credentials; the source is relevant in the context of devolution in Zimbabwe as established by the 2013 Constitution. During screening, everything that did not have a solid empirical basis (opinion pieces) was excluded. This systematic approach led to a comprehensive literature review of the evidence based around structural barriers, economic effects and participatory models with more than 30 references.

FINDINGS

KEY CHALLENGES IN ZIMBABWE'S DEVOLUTION PROCESS

Lack of a detailed statutory framework that specifically governs devolution is one of the primary challenges in Zimbabwe. Though there are provisions that exist in the constitution, there are no elaborate laws and, hence, the application is uneven and dominated mostly by the central government. This leads to a slow rate of payment of money and restricts the freedom of local governments. The other problem is the lack of full establishment of devolved governance structures especially at provincial and district levels. In the absence of well-defined roles and operation systems, local authorities will be at the mercy of decisions made by the central government. The literature of other settings indicates that inadequate coordination between the central and the local governments reduces the effectiveness of devolution and constrains its developmental potential (Chaudhary, 2019). Also, fiscal decentralisation is limited. Local authorities also do not have control over the use of funds even in areas where funds are being disbursed. Research indicates that the benefits of decentralisation are substantially diminished when financial authority is kept centralised because the local governments are unable to match expenditures with local priorities (Zhang *et al*., 2022).

The devolution of governmental powers and resources has always been a contested subject in Zimbabwe, as it has been in many other countries. The controversies that characterised the adoption of devolution have continued to shape or impede its implementation since 2013, when the new Constitution of Zimbabwe was adopted. The new administration of President Emmerson Mnangagwa had signalled that it would implement devolution during the 2018-2022 government term. The nature of the devolution to be implemented, however remaind unclear. This research interrogates the influence that devolution has had on the livelihoods of one of our rural communities in Zimbabwe. It is acknowledged that while the 2013 Constitution is not a perfect document that entrenches all the necessary aspects of an effective devolution programme, it does provide the starting point towards the establishment of a non-centralised form of government in Zimbabwe which is aimed at addressing the development gap of our communities. What is required in particular is for national officials (both political and administrative) to commit to a devolution process that respects the rules of the game. Importantly, if devolution is to succeed, it should be a shared objective supported by both those with and without power and by the general citizenry.

FINDINGS FROM REVIEWED DOCUMENTS

Finance, Economic Development and Investment Promotion Minister, Professor Mthuli Ncube, said the devolution funds have already had a positive impact in communities by improving infrastructure and livelihoods (*The Herald,* 31 March 2026). The minister highlighted that notable progress has been recorded though the funds fall below the constitutionally mandated threshold of 5% of total national revenues. The government is yet to meet the constitutional requirement of 5%. He said:

> "We have said that going forward, we just want to work harder to improve this ratio as we drive towards the full 5%. I can say that even though we have disbursed less than 5%, we have seen the positive impact of these funds, the differences that they have made. I think at some point, it will be necessary to just check the impact of these funds, no matter how small and how they have changed people's lives in those areas."

A parliamentarian, Mr Corban Madzivanyika, raised some concerns over the inability of the Treasury to meet the 5% threshold. Professor Mthuli emphasised that the disbursement of funds is based on request from local authorities:

> "It basically follows what we call a pull-and-push effect, where the pull means that there has to be demand or a request for the resources at that local authority level and we cannot just push. The gap between what was actually disbursed is explained by the fact that the disbursements are driven by an identified expenditure or investment-ready project."

The Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Presidential Affairs and Devolution, Tafadzwa Muguti, indicated that the government is encouraging a participatory approach that is more of a bottom-up approach (*The Zimbabwe Independent*, 21 March 2025). This approach is going to solve some problems that are attached to a centralised planning approach. He said:

> "Where we are right now, we are encouraging a bottom-up approach. What we are seeing is that as long as we continue to plan from the centre, in central government, it is not going to work. Our greatest strength in Zimbabwe, or our greatest opportunity for us to turn around the economy, is in our ability to listen to what the people are saying."

These sentiments showed that the government is prioritising the engagement of people from grassroots level to the national level through participatory approaches. He emphasised the need to give people a voice, primarily in Zimbabwe where the country is targeting to reach an upper-middle-income economy status by 2030.

> "We are seeing that many people from Harare parachute themselves into provinces, work on programmes and projects that no one knows and eventually report back that we are making progress. Devolution is not about decentralising or decongesting government. Devolution is about giving people a voice. Whatever brings them closer to an upper-middle-income society is what we need to work on."

It is, however, noteworthy that several councils in Zimbabwe are frustrated over the slow pace of devolution. Residents and experts in different sectors indicate that the slow pace is caused by political resistance, weak policy alignment and limited resources (*The Zimbabwean*, 8 October 2025). A senior lecturer at Zimbabwe Open University quoted in *The Zimbabwean*, Tobius Guzura, indicated that the government is slowly acting to fulfil the constitutional mandate of devolution:

> "Although the constitution mandated devolution, actual implementation has been slow and contested. Provincial councils were constitutionally recognised but have not been fully operationalised due to lack of enabling legislation." (*ibid.*)

The identified factors restricting devolution that include the fear of weakening central authority, political resistance and lack of resources, have left local authorities with little autonomy over decision-making. The senior lecturer also emphasised on the disbursement of funds already attached to certain projects to local authorities. This shows that the decision-making has not yet been decentralised to them. He stated that:

> "Disbursements have been erratic. They have been delayed or they have come with labels already attached to them. You are given money which you are already told what to use it for. So, in other words, you haven't been given money. We have got local

> authorities who, on paper are being given resources, but in reality, the resources are tokenistic, they are delayed, or they come already spent," (*ibid.*)

Residents quoted in *The Zimbabwean* (*ibid.*) also shared their views. Precious Shumba, Director of the Harare Residents Trust, indicated the importance of devolution funds in improving service delivery if implemented correctly. He said:

> "Local leaders understand community needs better, but they are often powerless because decisions are still made by the central government."

These sentiments were buttressed by Nomalanga Dube from Bulawayo who indicated the value of giving funds and power to local authorities, since they know best the needs of the local people. She said:

> "Communities know what they need most. If funds and power were truly given to local councils, we would see real change in our cities. Things like water, roads and refuse collection would improve because decisions would be made closer to the people." (*ibid.*)

In addition, a resident from Gweru, Tendai Moyo also highlighted concerns on transparency and accountability with regards to power and funds being controlled from Harare:

> "When power and money are controlled only in Harare, it becomes difficult to track how they are used. Devolution would make it easier for citizens to question local leaders directly and ensure that development funds are used properly." (*ibid.*)

The signs of commitment to devolution are being witnessed as the government commits to disburse at least iG14 billion (US$518 million) to local authorities in 2026 (*The Herald*, 21 January 2026). However, this spending raises the allocation to 4.83% of total government revenue, which is below the constitutionally mandated threshold in sections 264 and 301 of the Constitution. In addition, Treasury, quoted in *The Herald (ibid.),* highlighted that the funds will be directed to key sectors such as education, healthcare, water and sanitation, roads another important public services. Presenting the 2026 fiscal policy, Professor Ncube said:

> "Intergovernmental fiscal transfers will continue to be directed towards supporting development, with a strong focus on improving the quality and accessibility of public services. In 2026, priority will be on ongoing projects, including the completion of composite office blocks in Mutoko, Siakobvu and Wedza, and refurbishment of public buildings and urban renewal programmes,"

This shows the willingness of the government to decentralise projects and create development in different areas of the country, which are not just Harare.

Case Study: Citizen Participation Failure In Murewa District, Zimbabwe

Murewa District in Zimbabwe is a telling example of why, despite the long-standing decentralisation policies, people are still not participating at the local level. Although Zimbabwe's legal framework mandates devolution, granting local governments authority and resources to manage development effectively, the reality in Murewa reveals a significant disconnect between policy and practice. Nyama and Mukwada (2022) document that over 50% of residents in Murewa feel excluded from planning processes, with local governance dominated by top-down approaches that marginalise grassroots voices. These findings highlight that decentralisation in Zimbabwe remains largely superficial, with central government structures and the local elite maintaining disproportionate control over decision-making. Such political interference undermines the emancipatory aims of devolved governance, stifling community empowerment and accountability (Makara, 2018; Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). In the Murewa case, the formal decentralisation that was implemented was thus an illusion - power was delegated but not transferred and participatory processes were weak and lacked credibility with the people, resulting in their distrust of local institutions. The lack of citizens' participation in determining developmental priorities is worsened by political manipulation in the planning process in Murewa local government.

Nyama and Mukwada (2022) reveal that local officials use community meetings primarily as venues to advance political agendas, rather than genuinely solicit resident input, a practice that entrenches clientelism and elite control. These dynamics replicate broader trends observed in African decentralisation contexts, where devolution can be compromised by elite capture and politicisation, preventing local governments from functioning as fora of popular participation and responsiveness (Makara, 2018). Furthermore, the lack of institutional capacity within local government in Murewa further reduces its capacity to effectively implement participatory planning and strengthens hierarchical governance processes which, in turn, affects accountability processes (Olowu, 2003). These challenges collectively highlight the need for a lack of devolved powers to have led to meaningful citizen empowerment or improvement in socio-economic outcomes in the district. However, the Murewa experience also shows that systems of fiscal constraints negatively affect the operational autonomy of local governments which, in turn, hinders their capacity to effectively engage with communities. Fundings disbursement is often irregular and inadequate, based on central discretion and delays and despite the requirement on national level to allocate at least 5% of national revenue to the local authorities under the constitution (Makara, 2018). This fiscal dependency restricts local agendas and supports central control, reducing local options for inclusive development planning in supporting grassroot needs. Nyama and Mukwada (2022) highlight that inadequate resources contribute to poor infrastructure and service delivery in Murewa which, in turn, diminishes public enthusiasm for participation and weakens the perceived legitimacy of local authorities. A predictable and adequate financial system is also essential to devolved governance to fulfil the promises of decentralisation for participatory democracy and development unless devolution is a hollow process.

To tackle the policy-practice gap in Murewa, it is necessary to have a clear framework for strengthening local involvement and devolution which would focus on community capacity development, transparency and community empowerment. Strengthening and empowering marginalised citizens, including through civic education programmes, political leadership development and training and other empowerment measures, can help them to access local governance processes with confidence and to challenge the capture of decision-making by the elite (Ahmad and Talib, 2014; Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). Institutional reforms should seek to provide binding decentralisation frameworks which ensure fiscal independence and legal authority for local governments and accountability and participatory mechanisms for planning (Makara, 2018). The Murewa case only reinforces that such ‘integrative reforms' are necessary or decentralisation will simply continue to be centralised and marginalising citizens, instead of bringing about inclusive development and democratic governance. These lessons are key to furthering Zimbabwe's decentralisation journey and strengthening local governance institutions that are able to respond to community needs and aspirations.

DISCUSSION

Results indicate that devolution in Zimbabwe has not been fully unleashed due to the lack of a comprehensive statutory devolution framework, weak institutionalisation and the dominance of the central government. It provides some confirmation to the views of Wekwete and Shoko (2026) that while the constitutional undertakings are important, they will not achieve the desired results if they are not backed up by enforceable institutional mechanisms. The study also echoes Conyers' (2003) ideas that decentralisation in Zimbabwe has often been more rhetorical than real, as local governance units have often been without meaningful autonomy. Similarly, a meaningful devolution will come only when local institutions are given the autonomy to make decisions and be fiscally independent (Makara, 2018; Olowu, 2003). The findings are thus indicative of the fact that, despite the efforts of the Zimbabwean devolution agenda to achieve full devolution, there is still a policy-practice gap because legality is promised, but implementation has been incomplete. This void undermines local planning and understanding of service delivery and restricts communities' power to be able to influence development priorities according to local needs.

The evidence also suggests that participation of citizens in the planning process is low since the community is often not involved in decision-making. These findings are in line with Nyama and Mukwada (2022) , that citizens are excluded in development planning due to top-down governance in Murehwa District. Aulich (2009) also argues that if participation does not move from symbolic consultation to participatory governance, citizens will not get real influence. Similarly, Kakumba (2010) and Häikiö (2012) demonstrate that institutions must provide genuine opportunities for engagement, while citizens need to be confident and competent in engaging through these opportunities. Given that role of local participation in Zimbabwe is still limited because of weak civic empowerment, mistrust and elite capture, the present findings, therefore, suggest that these elements ought to be strengthened. Without the use of fora of participatory budgeting and participatory education, devolution without inclusive mechanisms and platforms can become the same open door that led to the same exclusions as it intended to eliminate.

The study further shows that any economic impact flowing from devolution is related to whether fiscal resources are delayed, centralised, or tied to predetermined projects. This aligns with the findings of Rodríguez-Pose *et al.* (2009) and decentralisation will be a success only when resources are allocated in line with the priorities of the local people (Ma and Mao, 2018). Similar sentiments were expressed by Zhang *et al*. (2022), who argue that social outcomes will be bettered with improved fiscal decentralisation. The evidence presented above indicates that, in the Zimbabwean context, through devolution, funds can have potential benefits to enhance livelihoods, infrastructure and service delivery, but this potential is not being realised due to a lack of fiscal autonomy and political interference. The findings of Frumence *et al*. (2013) and Tsofa *et al*. (2017) also indicate that decentralised systems frequently fail when local authorities are held responsible but lack authority and resources. So the evidence points to a combination of predictable funding, control of local budgets and transparent monitors to make sure that devolution can make a real difference to the economy.

In conclusion, the results highlight that devolution in Zimbabwe cannot be merely implemented by changing the administration, but must entail institutional reform, empowerment of the citizens and increased accountability structures. As Ribot (1999) suggests, "decentralisation" should not just delegate "functions" to local actors, but also "meaningful authority”. It also reiterates Ahmad and Talib (2014) who argue that empowerment is through the empowerment of the community through education, leadership development and participative institutions. The proposed model in the article is thus grounded in the literature, having incorporated several elements: legal reform, institutional strengthening, participatory planning and fiscal empowerment. The results indicate that, when all of them are present, local governments will be more able to meet community needs, to deliver better services and to restore trust. Devolution in this context must be interpreted as a democratic approach to development and Zimbabwe's effectiveness will hinge on whether this promise of the Constitution will be realised.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the requirement for devolution in the constitution, the implementation of the devolution process has proved challenging, with little progress in, or understanding of, moving away from a dominant central government, creating a sense of institutional autonomy at the provincial and district levels or enabling greater fiscal autonomy. The empirical findings from the study highlight the ongoing impact of central government dominance on the erosion of local planning which, in turn, manifests in slow disbursements of funds, a centralised decision-making process and minimal citizen participation, especially in Murewa District, where more than half of the populace feels left out on development processes. The proposed model is designed to improve the implementation of the current policy framework by reinforcing the existing policy framework, strengthening the institutional framework, creating participatory mechanisms and enhancing financial monitoring, thereby helping to overcome the policy-practice gap. The potential for the improvement of service provision and promotion of economic uplift in local authorities is enhanced by a sense of autonomy. However, political interference and capacity constraints are barriers to progress. The article highlights that integrated reforms are necessary for an effective devolution process to empower communities, hold them to account and link resource allocation to the priorities of the community. Last but not least, effective implementation will drive Zimbabwe's success in achieving equitable development, responsive governance and minimising regional differences, making devolution more than just a symbolic tool - it will become a driver of sustainable local development in rural and urban settings.

The six recommendations are immediate as a result of the findings of the study that will strengthen local participation and devolution. First, Parliament adopts a comprehensive Devolution Act in the next fiscal year, to implement the constitutional provisions, setting up a timeframe for transfers in the fiscal field and establishing the clear mandates for the local governments, eliminating unfair implementation. Second, Government fully establishes and capacitates provincial and district councils which are endowed with trained personnel and clear guidelines on how they will function, to ensure that they are autonomous from central directions and do not depend on Harare decisions. Third, local authorities have created mechanisms for participatory planning, such as public consultation and community development committees and participatory budgeting fora. This is in contrast to the exclusion reported in Murewa where residents' voices are marginalised by political manoeuvring. Fourth, Treasury provides timely and unconditional disbursements of 100% of national revenue, which will give local governments budgetary autonomy to allocate funds to meet the needs they have identified in their communities, instead of needs being pre-specified. Fifth, the Ministry of Local Government conducts nationwide civic education and leadership development programmes for marginalised groups to strengthen citizen agency and trust and mitigate reduced citizen participation due to lack of citizen trust and poor empowerment. Sixth, all stakeholders set up independent monitoring mechanisms with participation of CSOs to ensure transparency and accountability eroding public trust in devolved processes today due to elite capture and fiscal delays. Together, these activities will allow for the greater use of local voices as agents of development so that devolution can have an impact.

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