RETHINKING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN POST CORONA VIRUS PANDEMIC ERA IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to establish the extent to which the Corona Virus Disease COVID 19 has impacted citizen participation practices in Zimbabwe. Measures put in place to reduce spread of the pandemic like social distancing and quarantines have a direct impact on previously used spaces for citizen engagements. In view of the above, this qualitative research approach used publicly available literature from articles and reports to establish existing methods and practices of citizen engagement in Zimbabwe. Taking into account the transformations brought by COVID 19 pandemic, this paper recommends that the traditional approaches to citizen participation will not be compatible with the new landscape, therefore, they need to be remodeled and complimented with new methods like adoption of ICT and community radios thereby giving communities viable options to participate in local decision making.
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1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID19) is traced to Wuhan, Huwei province in China and it started getting global attention in December 2019, (World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020a). It was revealed that the novel virus attacks the human respiratory system and is transmitted when an infected person comes into contact with other people or objects causing immediate sickness and in most cases quick deaths.

Within a short space of time, the pandemic started spreading to other countries like Italy, Spain and Germany causing massive deaths on a daily basis thereby choking the health system resulting in WHO declaring it a world pandemic on 11th of March 2020, (Cucinotta and Vanelli, 2020). As the world was grappling with trying to find ways to limit the spread of the diseases, health experts stated that symptoms of the disease includes coughing, shortness of breath, fatigue and pneumonia. The lack of certainty on how the disease is transmitted among people created perceptions resulting in the spread of false information, (World Health Organization, 2020b). Some of the perceptions created centered on origins of the disease, available treatment methods, transmission patterns, effectiveness and impact of interventions by authorities. In Africa some social media platforms propagated a line of thinking based on racial lines stating that Africans were immune to the pandemic due to polio vaccinations. This further added confusion in coming up with acceptable preventative measures as people insisted in participating in decision making through their traditional public consultation meetings without any preventative measures. But as cases of infections started being recorded in Africa, it dawned to everyone that the pandemic affects everyone resulting imposition of restrictions.

In an effort to limit the spread of the pandemic, large gatherings where banned including all public meetings and other invited or created spaces of engagements. The rapid transmission of the pandemic across the globe caused severe panic and its prevention became number one priorities for all countries,(Cucinotta and Vanelli, 2020). In response to the declaration of COVID 19 as a worldwide pandemic, majority of countries including Zimbabwe declared full/partial lockdowns, closed business both public and private leaving essential areas only operating. But, due to low rates of infections and deaths in Africa, people grudgingly embraced the recommended prevention measures such as maintaining social distance and avoiding public gatherings by clandestinely congregating despite the risks posed by the pandemic. This behavior is understandable as people are still in denial mode about the effects of COVID 19.

However, this paper argues that the local governance landscape has already been altered therefore robust measures have to be put in place to shape future interactions between citizens and local governments. One such area is how local governance will be done because one of its core tenants is citizen participation in decision making which is traditionally achieved through various spaces but mainly at public gatherings in city halls, council chambers, open spaces, school halls, water points and other available spaces where people could congregate. These agoras are at the heart of local governance as they provide interaction platforms which shape socio-economic development trajectory of communities. However, the outbreak of COVID 19 pandemic calls for rethinking and redefining how spaces of citizen participation could be recalibrated to suit the current and post Coronavirus period.

2. Rationale For This Paper

Though cure for COVID 19 has not yet been found, the major debate which has gripped countries is how they will recover from the economic meltdown as evidenced by the revised economic growth figures which are now projected to be on the negative side. Though this is an essential area of focus, little attention has been put to understand how the social fabric of society which has been altered is going to cope up and come up with the decisions to revive the economy. For any sustainable development to emerge post COVID 19 period, citizen participation must be at the forefront of spearheading such endeavors. Therefore, it is the intention of this paper to propose new alternative methods or approaches which will ensure that good local governance practices are upheld during and post COVID-19 pandemic era in Zimbabwe.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach which (MacDonald and Headlam,1986) defines as;
"Concerned with a quality of information, qualitative methods attempt to gain an understanding of the underlying reasons and motivations for actions and establish how

people interpret their experiences and the world around them. Qualitative methods provide insights into the setting of a problem, generating ideas and/or hypotheses".

Therefore, in this research, qualitative approach is ideal to explain the problem which citizens are facing following the outbreak of COVID 19 pandemic. Secondary data from published articles, newspaper articles and reports were analyzed in order to synthesize all the views and understand emerging themes from the various sources relating to how local governance could be enhanced following outbreak of this global coronavirus pandemic.

4. Exploring The Concept Of Citizen Participation

The relationship between citizen participation and local governance is a seamless continuum as they go hand in glove. For (Chikerema, 2013) citizen participation is a desired and necessary community development process to be included in any policy making process because active participation of citizens in a democratic system produces fruitful outcomes. The outcomes should reflect the desires and aspirations of the local community. Another school of thought defines citizen participation as a deliberate process undertaken by local governments to identify different individual, organizations operating within its area and groups of citizens in its area of jurisdiction with the view of gathering views, informing them of developments and seeking support,(Commonwealth Local Government Forum, 2016). Similarly, (Arnstein, 1969) is of the view that citizen participation is,

"The redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared , goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated ,programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. In short, it is the means by which they can induce significant social reforms which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society"

She went on to propose the various typologies or forms of citizen participation in a form of a ladder which citizens follow when they participate in decision making with non-participation from being at the bottom whilst citizen control sits at the apex. Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing (2018), added that citizen participation is a process in which stakeholders and private citizens are engaged to influence public decision making in the council. From the definitions, it could be concluded that citizen participation involves mobilization of community members including organizations like civil society with the view of making sure that they actively contribute to the shaping of policies which will bring sustainable development in their locality. In order for citizen participation to be successful there is need for local governments to establish mechanisms and spaces for engagement.

4.1   Significance of Citizen Participation in Decision Making

The Ministry of Public Works and National Housing (2018), states that there are several advantages for engaging citizens in decision making. These include firstly, planning decisions will get public support which will result in their completion. Secondly, it allows cross pollination of ideas between stakeholders resulting in understanding of viable strategies which improves service delivery. Thirdly, citizen participation helps in conflict avoidance thereby saving financial and other resources which will then be channeled towards other useful projects.

5. Local Government And Local Governance In Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has a highly inclusive decentralized local government system which can be traced to the promulgation of the Prime Ministers directives of 1984, (Chigwata and Marumahoko, 2017). The directives came as reforms to the previously racially segregated local government system which was put in place by colonial administration. As (Chatiza, 2010) put it, the Prime ministers directives main thrust was the establishment of grass root participation structures so that the voices of communities could be captured in the development discourse within their areas. Further, the directive

sets a framework which delineated the roles between central government ministries and local government. The Prime Ministers were further entrenched through the pronouncement of the thirteen principles of decentralization in 1994, (Action Aid Zimbabwe, 2014). From 1984-2012 the Zimbabwean local government system operated through various statutes and acts of parliament, (Mapuva and Miti, 2019). This resulted in serious interference in functioning of local authorities by central government with most decisions being coming from the Centre . Therefore, citizen participation was in its weakest form until 2013 when Local governments system in Zimbabwe was constitutionalized under chapter 14 of the constitution of Zimbabwe amendment (No 20) of 2013.

Munyede and Mapuva, (2020) states that there are two categories of local governments in Zimbabwe namely urban councils and rural district councils. There are some notable differences between the categories. Firstly, urban councils are located in areas with well-developed infrastructure whilst rural district councils administer the less developed geographical spaces, (Chatiza, 2010). Secondly, in terms of population density, people are densely populated in urban areas and this makes it easy for citizen participation whilst in rural areas, people are sparsely distributed over wider territorial spaces. For this reasons, some citizen participation methods, practices and approaches used in urban councils may not be replicated in rural district councils due to these structural differences.

5.1   Local Governance and Citizen Participation

Whilst local government is concerned more with the formal institutional arrangements at district and sub-district level, local governance expand this traditional view by encompassing good governance practices by both elected and appointed officials. McKinlay, (2005) states that local governance is concerned with how a community's direction is influenced by the different networks within its locality. He further posits that best outcomes are achievable when influences from the different community members are aligned to work in a complimentary role to each other than competing with each other. By applying the concept of subsidiarity, decisions conceived by communities at

local level have added positive impact on sustainable development mainly because the people would have contributed in shaping the policies. Therefore, in order for local governance to emerge stronger and remain the bedrock for local socio-economic development in Zimbabwe post COVID 19 pandemic era, there is need to strengthen spaces of citizen participation as well as innovate new appropriate methods.

6. Legal Framework and Citizens Participation in Zimbabwe

Citizen participation has gained traction following the adoption of Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No 20) Act of 2013 as it has various provisions which upholds primacy of citizen's participation in local decision making processes. Section 2 (2) provides the supremacy of the constitution by outlining obligations for duty bearers like local governments to observe and fulfill all provisions of the constitution. The founding values under section 3 (1) (h) and (2)(g) as well as section 9 underscores the importance of good governance practices by state institutions at all levels in order to ensure that duty holders get quality services. In terms of gender participation, section 17 (1) (a) reads, "the State must promote the full participation of women in all spheres of Zimbabwean society on the basis of equality with men". The constitution also acknowledges the critical role played by youth in the decision making. In this regard section 20 (1) (b) states that youth must have opportunity to participate in socio-economic and political issues which affects their life. Rights holders are also empowered by section 62 (1) to hold public institutions accountable for their actions through access to information held by the State institutions like local governments at all level.

There are also statutes which provides means of participation by citizens at local government level like the Electoral Act ,Chapter (2:13) which gives right for citizens to participate in the elections of their Councilors, Members of Parliament and President during election period. Further, the Rural District Councils Act, Chapter (29:13) and the Urban Councils Act, Chapter (29:15) requires that citizens be engaged in formulating policies like budgets and developmental projects. Therefore, from a legal point of view

there are enough provisions which guarantees citizen participation in local decision making.

6.1   Citizen Engagement and Participation: Methods and Practice In Zimbabwe

Though Zimbabwe has a long history of local governance, its track record in actual participation of citizens is somewhat chequered mainly because in the past citizens were sidelined because councils were getting financial resources from grants as well as from developmental partners (CLGF,2016). Further, it is observed that the practice of citizen participation in local governments is poor and generally shallow as it is done for ritual processes like during budget making process. There is no standard framework for citizen participation but it is left to the innovative capacity of each local authority. There are no standard indicators which can be used to track how citizen participation would have performing (ibid).

There are several forms and ways in which citizens could influence institutions responsible for decision making in Zimbabwe. Chikerema, (2013) noted that citizens influences decision making processes when they participate in development planning process. For example in the construction of a school, they have the power to select sites for the projects. He further stated that they also participate through village development committees, ward development committees, council committees and full council. Also through forming or joining civil society organizations like residents associations they can effectively engage citizens. Other spaces for participation noted by (CLGF,2016) includes utilization of information technology especially social media applications like Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, bulk SMS, print and digital media .Others tools used includes utilization of suggestion boxes, business platforms, client charters and call centres. Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing, (2018) added that citizens also participate in the development process when formulating by-laws.

In most instances, citizen participation initiatives by local governments are driven by the need to comply with legislation, policies or to meet requirements of developmental

partners. Amongst the methods of citizen participation preferred is public gathering during budget consultation process (Madhovi, 2020). This method is popular because of the need to comply with budget approval requirements which require that an attendance register signed by attendees must be attached as proof of citizen participation. In view of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak this method is no longer sustainable as it requires gathering of large number of people at a single space which is in contract to health guidelines.

7. Opportunities and Challenges in Citizen Participation in Zimbabwe

7.1 Digital Technology and Citizen Participation

According to Sørensen, as cited in (Gwaka et al, 2018, p.1) digital technology includes equipment, applications, networks, transmission codes which facilitates interconnection, the people who create the information and construct the infrastructure. In the sphere of citizen participation, (Milakovich, 2010) argues that digital technology has empowering capacity to citizens because it allows marginalized people who would have been silent and invisible to be heard and seen. He further stated that digital technology allows the capturing of diversity in society and also it disperses power from centralized bureaucratic institutions and allows alternative voices to be heard. Over the last decades, Information Communication and Technology (ICT) has emerged as an important tool challenging traditional methods of interaction between citizens and authorities, (African Development Bank (ADB, 2019) as it removes redtape and many other restrictions posed by traditional methods. Some of the digital platforms which facilitate citizen participation includes internet, social media like Facebook, Twitter and short text messages. Therefore, embracing digital technologies provides opportunities for citizen participation post corona virus epidemic era irrespective of status of the citizen.

However, there are challenges relating to ICT in Zimbabwe which have a negative impact to citizen participation. In this regard (ADB, 2019), highlighted that for some time ICT has not been a priority for the Zimbabwean government as evidenced by its rankings in the world which shows it occupying number 124 out of 139 among

developing countries. In terms of ICT penetration, research by (Gwaka et al, 2018) showed that there is disparity between urban and rural areas with most infrastructure being located in urban areas as private players are reluctant to enter into areas with lower returns which are in rural areas. In relation to, local governments in Zimbabwe, to a certain extent they have embraced ICT as part of their citizen engagement mechanism, however (Munyede and Mapuva, 2020) noted that most local governments have serious ICT challenges involving adoption, capacity and utilization. They highlighted that lack of adoption of ICT is a well-established culture in most local governments as they prefer manual systems which allows corruption and redtape for personal benefit .This was also collaborated by (Development Governance Institute, 2013) which noted that in most councils, ICT is mainly used for accounting functions like billing, payroll preparations and to some extent by engineers as well as planners. Generally, ICT is very much fragmented and is only used when responding to directives like requirements to establish websites and databases. The resultant effect is that most channels of engagement are not fully utilized and non-responsive resulting in citizens resorting to passive participation thereby affecting realizing of most social, economic and cultural aspirations of communities.

However, despite the many advantages which digital technologies have in promoting citizen participation, they are challenges in realizing its full potential. Gwaka et al, (2018) noted that there is poor connectivity in rural areas in Zimbabwe. Investment in telecommunication is neglected because the profit margins in rural areas are low such that it discourages private investors. Another impeding factor is non-availability of electricity in most rural areas. The issue of electricity also affects even the urban settlements in Zimbabwe because prolonged power cuts or load shedding are common and this impact on the modes which citizen have to use in participation.

7.2 Energy Sector and Citizen Participation

Availability of power supplies underpins all services as it acts as catalyst to all development of a country, (ADB, 2019). For ICT to function properly, it must be

available to power all the infrastructure and systems which promote citizen participation. However, Zmbabwe's archilles has been reliance on hydro power whilst marginalizing renewable sources like solar and geo-thermal energy. The erratic rainfall patterns being experienced due to climatic changes has affected the ability to generate electricity resulting in the country relying on imports from other regional countries. The failure to have stable energy supply has a negative impact on citizen participation using ICT.

7.3 Governments and Censoring of Spaces of Citizen Engagement

The emergency of social platforms as an alternative space for citizen participation attracted the attention of governments because citizens prefer it as a better conduit to express their views. Social platforms challenge traditional participation methods by eliminating bureaucracy as it allows real time access of information by citizens, (Ogini and Moitui, 2015). Public institutions joined these platforms for various reasons which include sharing information with citizens and also to remain relevant. However, despite these positive contributions of social platforms to citizen participation, (National Intelligence Council, 2018) noted that most governments in Sub-Saharan Africa have enacted legislations which limits freedoms of citizens by monitoring usage of social media. This suppression has also been extended to civil society as well to traditional methods of public participations by requesting citizens to apply for permission to congregate and dictating content of messages on social media.

The outbreak of corona virus pandemic has provided an opportunity for governments to enact additional laws which curtails citizen participation in decision making. Though the laws appear as if it's a requirement to comply with health guideline, the punitive measures for failure to comply indicates appetite to muffle citizens. Some of the proclaimed regulations attract stiffer monetary fines and imprisonment which does not correspond to the gravity of the offence committed. Whilst this seems noble, the major fear is that these draconian laws are likely to be extended beyond post corona virus era

and this has serious implications on how citizens will constructively interact with officials in decision making in the future.

Therefore, if the local government system is to remain relevant in Zimbabwe post COVID-19 era, citizen participation must be taken as a strategic area which needs concerted effort to institutionalize it at local levels .This is necessary because (CLGF, 2016) argues that engagement of citizens is a prerequisite as it build trust which enables local governments to provide quality services which will then reduce polarization and promote performance. The following recommendations will assist to enhance and promote citizen participation.

8. Recommendations

The local government sector is composed of diverse actors, hence solutions to improve citizen participations will need to be targeted or tailor made to each category so that all voices would be captured to enhance decision making.

1)   In Zimbabwe the Broadcasting Services Act, Chapter (12:08) which is a new opportunity, allows individuals or institutions to establish community radios which can operate within areas of their jurisdiction. Therefore, this is an opportunity which local governments can embrace to establish and operate their own community radio stations. Radio is one of the most popular media of sharing information in rural Zimbabwe as it has potential to reach all actors in a council area.

2)   There is need to have radical institutional changes to adapt to the new operating environment by coming up with a citizen participation framework with verifiable indicators which will be used to review progress periodically.

3)   Local government must prioritize in their budgets, funds to strengthen citizen participation; it must not be taken as an ad hoc activity but must be a key result activity.

4)   Local governments needs to invest in ICT at all levels and this needs to be packaged as follows;

•   At institutional level adoption of ICT must be a priority area, with video conferencing facilities being made available in council chambers.

• Communication through social media must be accepted as official communication and adopt ethical practices which removes censorship of content delivered.

• Spaces like websites and emails must be functional and continuously updated to continuously give citizens information about developments in their locality.

5) In less developed areas especially in rural district councils, government must prioritize these areas in terms of infrastructure development by directing channeling of fiscal allocations under devolution agenda. This means harnessing the power of solar energy which is abundant in Zimbabwe and takes it as priority for rural areas.

6) Empirical studies have shown that civil society and developmental partners have strong experience in community engagements, therefore there is need to collaborate with local governments and build capacities which will promote citizen participation.

7) Human capital in local governments have practical experience of citizen participation but in most instances they lack understanding of contemporary approaches, therefore this needs to be bridged by creating linkages with institutions of higher learning to tailor made appropriate on the job courses with certifications as outputs. In order to ensure relevance of such trainings the certification must be tied to reward and promotional management system within the council.

8) In order for citizen to reclaim their space after COVID 19, they will have to engage their member of parliament for removal of restrictive laws while pushing for strengthening of policies and laws which guarantees the protection and prevention of arbitrary abuse of laws which violates their freedom of expression by government either on social media or traditional public spaces.

9) Civil Society should advocate and lobby for realization of freedoms of expression as provided by the constitution.

10) Above all these recommendations there is need to strengthen the existing system through observing the prescribed health precautions when it comes to public meetings

9 Conclusion

This paper focused on citizen participation in local decision making process in Zimbabwe by highlighting the spaces available to promote such interactions which include institutional arrangements as well as ICT. It also highlighted the legal provision which guarantees citizen participation and its importance to improve decision making. The importance of understanding that COVID-19 has altered the traditional local government consultation landscape was outlined and then possible recommendations which will ensure that inclusive decision making are attained.

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