

DECENTRALIZATION IN ZIMBABWE

Frances Stewart, Jeni Klugman and A.H. Helmsing, 1994

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1. General Introduction

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in southern Africa in which African majority rule was achieved only in 1980. Dual structures in the social, economic and political spheres are legacies of the racist settler regime. In this context the national government has had the difficult task of attempting to redress past inequities without alienating the white population.

1.1 Human Development

Zimbabwe has achieved impressive strides in human development since independence, as reflected by improvements in such indicators as literacy, child mortality and life expectancy which stand well above regional averages (see table 1). Access to services important for human development also compares favourably with countries of the region. For example, combined primary and secondary enrolment ratios stood at 95% by 1986-88. These achievements reflect a substantial restructuring of public expenditures since independence towards priority social services and away from defence.

Nonetheless, the country remains amongst the "low human development" group as classified by the 1992 Human Development Report. Improved performance is especially urgent in certain areas, including economic growth, daily calorie supply as percentage of requirements and maternal mortality rates. Serious disparities in human development indicators and access to services persist, reflecting the continuing impact of past discrimination.

Rural-urban gaps reveal the disadvantages faced by the majority black population, who are largely rural based. Whereas all urban dwellers are estimated to have access to health services, only about six in ten living in the countryside do. One study found that, in 1979, the income of urban non-black residents stood at Z\$8500, compared to the average Z\$220 earned by rural peasant farmers, a disparity of 39:1. Within the urban areas inequality was estimated at 27:1 (Riddell 1982). In 1980, whites had exclusive ownership of almost half the land (two-thirds of the best land; see table 2) and (together with foreign interests) owned virtually all of the capital in industry and mining.

1.2 The Economy

Structure

With an abundance of natural resources, relatively good physical infrastructure and a diversified industrial sector, the Zimbabwean economy has been described as the "most highly developed in black Sub-Saharan Africa" (Stoneman and Cliffe 1989). In 1988 services accounted for 38% of GDP, followed by the industrial sector, including mining (7% of GDP and 40% of export revenue) and a diversified manufacturing base (26% of GDP and 16% of formal sector employment). The period of UDI (Unilateral Declaration of Independence) left a closed economy, with enforced protection stimulated by state intervention favouring settler interests. Agriculture represents 15% of national income, employing approximately 70% of the total labour force and 25% of formal sector employees. The inherited dual structure of agriculture has been modified to some extent since independence, but the distinction between the commercial (largely white, large scale farming) and Communal Lands, farmed by blacks, remains important.

Recent Trends

Between 1974-79 national income fell, with an increasing share of public expenditure (up to 30-40%) directed towards the military. Since independence, economic performance has fluctuated, largely due to extraneous factors, including drought, world recession, falling demand for Zimbabwe's exports and foreign exchange shortages. Overall, real economic growth averaged 3% in the 1980s - growth in per capita terms was almost negligible.

The African government maintained a policy of economic nationalism in the context of strong state control. But there was external pressure to shift this focus. In 1982 an IMF agreement was signed, which broke down in 1984. In 1990 an Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) was launched, with the support of the IMF and World Bank, featuring trade liberalisation, market-based interest rates, reductions in the budget deficit and domestic deregulation.

In the rural areas, extensive commercial farming areas remain dominated by a relatively small number of white farmers, who still receive 70% of agricultural credit, extension and other services (Stoneman and Cliffe 1989). Yet since independence the Communal

Lands have increased their share of national supplies of crops and livestock, as many of the disadvantages facing them were reversed.

1.3 Politics

Political developments in independent Zimbabwe were constrained by the Lancaster House agreement. The Constitution (for a time) 1 entrenched the interests of the whites, reserving a certain number of parliamentary seats for whites-only, and prohibiting compulsory acquisition of most land. These legal constraints, combined with the practical desire to secure an 'orderly transition' which would avoid the sudden exodus of capital and white settlers experienced by Mozambique, led to what was termed a policy of 'reconciliation'.

By the time of independence, the Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU) had a well established organisation throughout much of the country. The party secured 63% of the black vote, and 57 of the 80 black seats in the first national elections in 1980 when Robert Mugabe formed a government. Nkomo's Zimbabwean African People's Union (ZAPU) won twenty seats, mainly in Matabeleland. The first Cabinet included both ZAPU and segregationist politicians, but ZAPU was excluded from the government in 1983. After several years of tension and violence, ZANU and ZAPU signed a unity accord in 1987. At the national elections in March 1990, ZANU-PF won all but three of the 120 seats contested, and Mugabe received 78% of total votes cast for the presidency. However there was a significant abstention rate; only 54% of eligible voters went to the polls, compared to turnout rates of over 90% in the 1980 and 1985 elections.

Although the black population has experienced substantial advances in access to health and education services and economic opportunities since independence, they still face serious problems of poverty and unemployment. It is reported that the gap between the 'benz' lifestyle enjoyed by the 'chefs' (party and government leaders) and that of most Zimbabweans, is bitterly resented. While ESAP was portrayed as a means of "working together for all of us"2, it is uncertain whether the reform measures will promote the intended goals without adversely affecting vulnerable groups in Zimbabwean society.

2. Structure of Government and Decentralization Measures

At the national level there have been significant changes in the structure of government since independence, the net result being a single chamber of parliament and an executive presidency directly elected by the people, with a move towards a one-party state, particularly since 1988. From Independence, the government declared its intention to promote decentralization, and supported this by a series of institutional innovations.

2.1 Steps toward decentralization

a. The colonial system and the position at independence.

In the colonial era, the policy of racial segregation dominated economic and social policies enforced by such legislation as the Land Apportionment Act 1930 (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1985). Local government was divided on the basis of race - Urban Councils and Rural Councils (formed in the 1960s out of the 'road committees') were elected by the whites for white settler areas and enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy. In contrast, Native Councils (later termed African Councils), which covered the communal African farming areas, were subject to central control. A key official was the Native (later District) Commissioner, appointed by the central government, who was ex-officio President of the Council. Community development boards were created in the 1960s -under the authority of the District commissioner - to define the development needs of the community. The number of African Councils grew over time to 242 by 1980.

During the period of UDI the administration of black rural areas became increasingly centralised and authoritarian, dominated by centrally-appointed commissioners with "dictatorial powers" (Mutizwa-Mangizwa 1985,p.60). Extensive centrally-determined rules governed such activities as land use. The motive was that of central control rather than local development (Stonemen and Cliffe 1989). According to Mutizwa-Mangiza, shortage of arable land in Tribal Trust Lands was a fundamental problem (see table 2) which resulted in impoverished African Councils for blacks, with affluent Rural and Urban Councils for whites. The African Councils were very fragmented geographically. Key administrative personnel occupied an ambiguous position - chiefs were the paid and appointed officials of the government, and were also supposed to represent African opinion. From the early 1970s, in an increasing number of areas the rebels gradually managed to gain control and settler authority broke down.

At independence there was a declared commitment to decentralization and participation, and therefore a clear need to restructure government at the local level. In practice this has taken three forms. First the creation of new Ministries and deconcentration of others: the Ministry of Local Government and Rural and Urban Development (MLGRUD), and the Ministry of Community Development and Co-operatives (MC&CD) were established, while most Ministries have been dispersed spatially, and are formally represented down to the district level. The extension workers of the MC&CD operate at the village level. In other words there has been a significant deconcentration of central government activities. Secondly, a series of legislative enactments and directives have sought to democratise and strengthen local government, although the system of local government is characterised by uneven development across the country, in terms of functions, capacity and resource base. Thirdly, a participatory organisational structure was established to permit local participation in development planning.

b. District Councils Act 1980.

The District Councils Act 1980 (amended in 1981 and 1982) applied to the Communal Lands, where it revived local government after the period of guerrilla insurgency, consolidated the previously fragmented authorities from over 220 to 55, and democratised the system of local government. District Councils consist predominantly of elected members, plus those nominated under the Act (e.g. chiefs and headmen are ex

officio members). They are chaired by an elected member. The councils are the principal planning and development agencies within their jurisdictional zones. They have limited powers of taxation, implement a variety of central legislative enactments, and provide various services. The District Administrator, who is chief executive of the council, is a national civil servant, responsible for overall planning, development and co-ordination. Although the traditional leaders who had dominated local government during the colonial era were not removed (as in Tanzania, for example), no new ones were appointed and their powers of adjudication and land allocation were transferred to the District Councils. The average population per DC is 78 000, although it varies from 15,000 (Mzarabani) to 227,000 (Gokwe -data for 1982).

c. The Prime Minister's Directive 1984

Organisational structures for popular participation in development planning were outlined in the Prime Minister's Directive on Decentralization (1984 & 1985), which provided the basis for a hierarchy of representative bodies at the village, ward, district and provincial levels.

Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) are elected bodies with responsibility for defining local needs. VIDCOs present village needs to Ward Development Committees (WADCOS), which cover about six villages and consist of VIDCO representatives. They oversee and prioritise local needs and forward these to the District Council. Each ward is represented by a district councillor.

District Development Committees (DDC) are planning and co-ordination committees, composed of two local councillors, together with 18-28 central government officials from the sectoral ministries, and the police, army, and Central Intelligence Organisation. Membership is dominated by representatives of the central government. They are chaired by the District Administrator, currently a CG employee. The main planning functions of the DDC are to formulate District Development plans (short and long term), based in part on the plans forwarded from the VIDCOs and WADCOS. These are forwarded to the Provincial Development Committee (see below). The DDC also submit annual estimates to the Public Sector Investment Program (PSIP) via the Provincial Development Committees. The DDCs permit horizontal co-ordination of the activities of sectoral ministries and local authorities.

d. Provincial Councils and Administration Act 1985

This legislation gave increased focus to the province, for planning. Table 3 presents the populations and area of each of the eight provinces. The Provincial Council consists of the chairmen and one councillor selected by each of the Councils in the province (District, Rural and Urban), one member nominated by the ruling party, and a representative from the Provincial Assembly of Chiefs. It is chaired by the Provincial Governor, who is appointed by the President and enjoys Cabinet rank, and sits in the national parliament. Governors are responsible for co-ordination of the activities of sectoral ministries and the District Councils. It is their task to liaise with the

Development Committees and oversee District Councils; however the office of Governor lacks mandatory powers in respect of both local authorities and sectoral ministries. The Provincial Development Committee (PDC) is composed of heads of ministries at provincial level, members nominated by the police, army and Central Intelligence Organisation, the Provincial Planning Officer of the Department of Physical Planning, and leaders of commerce and industry operating within the province who may be co-opted. The committee is chaired by the Provincial Administrator, a central government employee, and is responsible for formulating plans for co-ordinated development in the province. To this end it produces short and long term plans which are supposed to reflect a combination of District Development Plans, provincial plans of Ministries, the PDC's own ideas, government national policies and, where possible, major development plans of private organisations (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1991). It is important to note that the province itself does not have any functional responsibilities, nor does it have any source of finance. At present, the primary role of the province in the development planning process is to ensure that district project proposals are co-ordinated, and presented to sectoral ministries -i.e. a project sorting function (PDSP 1991).

e. Amalgamation 1988+

The most recent legislative reform, the Rural District Councils Act 1988, purported to end the dual system of local government in rural Zimbabwe, through amalgamation of the Rural Councils and the District Councils into 55 Rural District Councils. ³ The aim is to overcome the colonial legacy of separate development based on race, and to permit a more equitable distribution of public services. However the amalgamation has been fraught with difficulties and reflects a range of compromises which seriously detract from its ostensible objectives. Full democratic participation has not been extended to the former Rural Council areas, where only local taxpayers and their spouses are able to vote, thereby excluding the black landless farmworkers (i.e. the majority of the population in these areas). Nor does the RDC Act unify the tax base, but continues to rely on the basic tenurial divisions between the different wards: commercial, communal and resettlement, and urban. The proceeds of the land development levy (collected from the commercial wards) are to be spent on road maintenance. Thus as Helmsing (1991) points out, whilst the Act formally does away with a relic of separate development, "basic socio-economic and tenurial divisions have remained and the Act accepts these and the RDC is organised around these divisions" (p.134). In any case in early 1992 it had still not come into effect. Attempts at implementation began in 1990, through the resolution of boundary disputes.

2.2 Overview of current responsibilities and system of finance

The responsibilities and powers of District Councils fall into two broad spheres - the delivery of basic social and economic services at the local level, and participation in development planning. In theory, the District Council also has significant responsibilities in planning development activities within the area, although local efforts in this sphere are often perceived to be rather ineffective (see below).

The scope of the powers and responsibilities of the DCs is much more limited than the Rural and Urban Councils (see table 4). The District Councils are responsible (often concurrently with sectoral ministries) for a range of services, including basic education and health, sanitation, housing and social welfare, as well as some business ventures intended to generate income to help finance their expenditures (e.g. retailing liquor). However, most DC expenditure goes to education (around 90% - Table 5).

The allocation of functions between different levels of government is not well defined, so that it is not always apparent where central government activities should stop and where local authority activities should start (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1990). In some areas this has been a source of controversy. Regarding primary education, for example, the Ministry has sought to recentralise vital elements of the service. Teachers, who were formerly selected, recruited and paid through the District Council were, in 1987, placed under a National Unified Teaching Service administered by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Health proposed a similar recentralisation of health personnel, although this has not yet been carried through.

In Zimbabwe the most striking feature of current financial arrangements is the overwhelming dependence of District Councils upon central grants which are tied to specific purposes. On average, District Councils raise only 15% of total local revenue through taxes, rates, charges, etc; the remainder comes in the form of transfers from the centre all of which are tied to particular activities, approved centrally. What constitutes an "approved expenditure" is determined by central ministerial regulations and circulars. The grants system works with advances and reimbursements based upon approvals. There are effectively no block grants to the district level other than a lump sum for administration, which is based on central calculations of local requirements. In education, for example, there is a tuition grant, to be used for the purpose of "tuition" only (narrowly defined), and not for any other expenses. The lack of discretion in local expenditures is exemplified by the extremely fragmented system of accounts kept by District Councils, which involve up to fifteen separate accounts for different revenues and activities, with no flexibility of movement of funds within or between accounts. Thus the colonial practice wherein the vast majority of financial allocations were made on a sectoral basis has been maintained, which effectively means a very centralised and compartmentalised system of finance.

The DCs have very limited powers of taxation: they collect a small amount of revenue from the development levy (a poll tax), a little more from fees, licenses, and income generating projects, but mainly rely on central government grants. In contrast, the urban and rural councils receive a significant proportion of revenue from rates on property and a levy on beer.

To summarise, since independence there have been important changes in the structure of government, broadly favouring decentralization. First, there has been significant deconcentration of sectoral ministries to the local level. Second, democratic structures have been established at the district level, which will be further improved when (as envisaged) the DA becomes responsible to the DC, and not a centrally appointed official,

and amalgamation is completed. Third, participatory structures were established to allow local participation in national planning from the village level upwards.

But the real extent of decentralization has been limited by a number of factors: first, as noted above, by lack of financial autonomy of the DCs; second, by moves by important sectoral ministries to recentralise activities; third, limited influence of the local authorities over the National Plan in practice (to be discussed below); fourth, by excessive focus on the Provincial level, which has no directly elected representatives, and no powers of taxation; and finally, political factors, including the absence of a secret ballot, and the dominance of a centralised single party structure.

1 In fact the whites-only electoral roll was abolished in 1987, and property rights could be altered from 1990.

2 This is the theme of the strident public media campaign in 1991 launched in three languages, in newspapers, radio and television across the country.

3 The local government units are still small, relative to the rest of Africa.