

An Analysis on Specific Challenges that have Arisen in the Implementation of Devolution in Zimbabwe.

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ABSTRACT

The research paper analyses the specific political, legislative, fiscal, administrative, and capacity-related challenges that have significantly hindered the effective implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe. The study employed desk research to gather information from reports and online documents. The researcher extracted meaningful data from readily available data from government publications, earlier research and official documents. The study focused on understanding these specific impediments through the Principal-Agent theory. In an analysis of the specific challenges that have been encountered during the implementation of the devolution programme in Zimbabwe the study found that the failure to align existing laws with the Constitution and lack of sustained commitment from the central government affected the full implementation of the devolution programme. Also, failure to achieve fiscal adequacy and limited revenue-generating capacity by local authorities and critical capacity gaps within skills, staffing, systems, and coordination plague the full implementation of devolution. Understanding these challenges is crucial not only for diagnosing the reasons behind the slow progress but also for informing potential pathways towards more effective governance, sustainable development, and the strengthening of democratic institutions in the country.

Key words: Devolution, decentralization, administrative, fiscal, capacity building, legal.

Introduction and Background

Across the globe, various nations have embarked on devolution processes, driven by aspirations to bring decision-making closer to the citizenry, accommodate regional diversity, and address historical imbalances in power and resource distribution (Gwiza & Jarbandhan, 2025). Prior to the postwar era, only Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Yugoslavia, Australia, Canada, India, and the USA had systems in which the regional tier of government played any significant role, and even in some of these cases the role of regional governments had been waning (Rodriguez-Pose & Gill, 2003). At the beginning of the 21st century this panorama has radically changed. For many years since independence, African countries have been insulated by governance related issues that jeopardized service delivery (Juma, 2017). Recently, a devolutionary trend has swept the world to enhance transfer of responsibilities closer to the people and Zimbabwe is no exception to this trend. Zimbabwe adopted a new constitution that legislates a devolved governance system in 2013. The adoption of the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act marked a pivotal moment, formally enshrining devolution as a fundamental principle and objective of governance within the nation (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013). The basic assumption was, among other things, that if Zimbabwe had adopted devolution in its new constitution, the problems usually characterised by local people ascribed to over-centralisation of political and administrative power might have been addressed (Chigwata, 2019; Mudau & Nyane, 2022). In Kenya, devolution made way to the Constitution due to high demand of inclusive sustainable development by the people (Juma, 2017) The constitution states that governmental powers and responsibilities must be devolved between the national government, provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities, which are expected to ensure good governance by being effective, transparent, accountable and responsive to the needs of local people (Chigwata, 2019). The constitutional provisions, coupled with subsequent political pronouncements, including commitments from the administration succeeding former President Mugabe, signalled a potential shift away

from decades of highly centralised governance towards a more decentralised and participatory model (Chimbindi, 2021).

This introduction of devolution of power as a new governance model in Zimbabwe replaced deconcentration on the premise that devolution is a more democratic, citizen-centred, participatory, more transparent, accountable and locally development-focused governance system (Moyo & Ncube, 2014). Devolution of power was therefore legislated to address the democratic deficits and also broadly to address issues of citizen participation in local development and local government accountability (Moyo & Ncube, 2014). The core reasons for legislating devolution were to fix past centralisation issues, boost citizen involvement in local decisions, improve service delivery, and increase local accountability by giving communities a direct say in development priorities as mandated by the 2013 Constitution.

The concept of devolution, representing the transfer of governmental powers, responsibilities, and resources from central authorities to sub-national levels of government, holds significant promise for enhancing democratic governance, improving public service delivery, and fostering equitable development (Moyo & Ncube, 2014). If managed well, devolution will lead to the realisation of development goals across all geographical locations (Mapuva & Miti, 2019). Devolution is universally acknowledged as a commendable and preferred approach to good governance. Devolution is widely considered a key component and desirable strategy for good governance and sustainable development by different scholars [Moyo and Ncube (2014), Kanyinga (2016), Muchadenyika (2014), Masunungure and Ndoma (2013), Dewa (2023) etc], policymakers, and international institutions such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank. The implementation of devolution frequently correlates with improved economic development trajectories at the local level.

Despite the constitutional mandate and the apparent cross-party consensus on the desirability of devolution, its practical implementation has been fraught with significant difficulties and delays (Shumba & Gutsa, 2025). Dewa (2023) highlighted that despite political shifts, the constraints on implementing devolution, such as resource mobilization and coordination weaknesses continue to delay progress. More than a decade after the Constitution's adoption, implementation of effective devolution remains largely unfulfilled, prompting serious concerns regarding the disconnect between enshrined principles and administrative realities in Zimbabwe. According to Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis Research Unit ZEPARU (2020) policy brief, the anticipated benefits, such as enhanced local autonomy, improved responsiveness to local needs, equitable resource distribution (including the constitutional requirement for at least 5% of national revenues to be allocated to provinces and local authorities, Section 301(3)), increased citizen participation, and the promotion of national unity; have been slow to materialise.

It is quite evident that administrative, political, legislative and fiscal challenges have arisen during the implementation of devolution, which has impeded its full implementation. Nyikadzino and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022) describe the process as being hindered by a lack of "intergovernmental balance," where central government micromanagement and bureaucratic resistance create significant institutional friction. The persistence of centralised control, delays in aligning existing laws with the new constitutional framework, ambiguities in policy direction, concerns over resource allocation and management, and questions surrounding the capacity of sub-national structures to assume devolved functions collectively point towards deep-seated challenges hindering the realisation of Zimbabwe's devolution agenda (Chimbindi, 2021; Chigumira et al., 2020).

Due to the challenges embedded in the centralised service delivery models, devolution has become a buzzy reform based on the assumption that by creating an institutional framework at subnational levels, groups and citizens can organise themselves and participate in political and economic decisions affecting them, and subnational governments will be empowered to respond to the needs and preferences of the citizen (Nyikadzino & Machakanja, 2021).

This research paper foregrounds a critical analysis of the specific challenges that have arisen in the implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe since the adoption of the 2013 Constitution. Analysis on specific challenges helps in informing legislative and institutional reforms. The study seeks to bridge the gap that is

causing differences between constitutional mandate and reality. It aims to move beyond general statements about implementation failure to identification and examination of the concrete obstacles encountered across various domains. Research into the challenges of devolution in Zimbabwe is a prerequisite for successful governance reform. Without a deep understanding of why implementation has stalled, efforts to achieve devolution will likely remain superficial. Previous studies indicated a gap in understanding why devolution fails in contexts where a nation has a standing Constitution which is supportive of full implementation of devolution. The current study focused on analysing the specific challenges that causes differences between "policies on paper" and "policies in practice". A clear grasp of challenges that have arisen during the implementation of the devolution agenda provides a foundation for policymakers, civil society organisations, and citizens to advocate for and design necessary reforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explores into the conceptual underpinnings of devolution, traces its historical trajectory within the Zimbabwean context, outlines the key constitutional provisions established in 2013, and summarises pertinent findings from existing research concerning the implementation process and its associated challenges.

Conceptual Framework of Devolution

According to Devolution and Decentralisation Policy of Zimbabwe (2020), devolution involves the transfer of specific powers, functions, responsibilities, and resources from a central government to subordinate, quasi-autonomous governmental units at a sub-national level. True devolution entails granting sub-national entities, such as provincial or local governments, a degree of political, administrative, and fiscal autonomy (Muchadenyika & Williams, 2018). These devolved units as drawn from the Devolution and Decentralisation Policy of Zimbabwe (2020) typically possess legislative and executive powers within their jurisdictions, raise their revenues or receive unconditional transfers, and are accountable downwards to their local constituents, often through elected councils. The core purpose is to establish and empower independent tiers of government capable of providing public services tailored to local needs and preferences (Chimbindi, 2021). In essence, these attributes work together to create a more effective, democratic, and responsive governance system that directly addresses the diverse needs of communities.

According to Paun, Pope, McKee, Fright & Allen (2024) devolution is a situation where the state transfers legislative, executive, financial and administrative decision-making authority to local governments that have clear and legally recognised jurisdictions within which they provide public services to constituents to whom they are accountable to. Masunungure & Ndoma (2013), defined devolution as a transfer or delegation of power by an upper level of government, often central government, to lower units of governance, for instance, provincial and local governments. The purpose of devolution is to make and strengthen independent levels of government that are mandated to perform defined functions. Devolution involves the transfer from centre to the locality of decision-making powers and associated resources (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022).

Proponents argue that devolution enhances democratic governance by bringing decision-making closer to the people, thereby increasing citizen participation, transparency, and accountability (Zinyama, Kuwa & Manyera (2023), Moyo & Ncube (2014), Vhudzi (2019)). Devolution can foster a sense of ownership and responsiveness, potentially leading to more efficient and effective service delivery in areas like health, education, and infrastructure (UNDP cited in Chimbindi, 2021). Furthermore, devolution is often seen as a mechanism for managing ethnic or regional diversity, promoting national unity by accommodating local identities and aspirations, and ensuring a more equitable distribution of national resources, particularly benefiting historically marginalised areas (Hope, 2014; Nhede, 2013). In the Zimbabwean context, the expectation was that devolution, if well implemented, could address issues of regional exclusion, improve dilapidated infrastructure, stimulate local economic development, and ultimately contribute to national cohesion (Chimbindi, 2021).

Historical Context of Decentralisation in Zimbabwe

Decentralisation of power in Zimbabwe is not entirely new, since Independence in 1980 efforts have been made to devolve to lower tiers of government, but the actual implementation of devolution has remained incomplete due to a gap between constitutional provisions and practical reality. Historically, the idea of devolution was

foreseen by the introduction of the Salisbury Sanitary Board by the British South Africa company in the 1890s which was seen as the first local government body (Chimbindi, 2021). It was developed into full urban councils, European rural councils and Native councils all which were strongly managed by the central government and were generally meant to control the indigenous population in Zimbabwe (Mapuva, 2012). Post-independence, Zimbabwe inherited a highly centralised state structure. Early attempts at decentralisation under the Prime Minister's Directives of 1984 and 1985 led to the creation of Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) and Ward Development Committees (WADCOs) (Musekiwa, 2020). These structures were intended to facilitate grassroots participation in development planning. However, they largely failed to achieve their objectives due to a lack of resources, inadequate skills among members, and significant interference from the central government (Muchadenyika, 2014). Rural District Councils (RDCs) and Urban Councils were established under separate Acts (Chapter 29:13 and 29:15 respectively), but they too operated under the strong influence of the central government.

For decades, there has been a centralized control of development in government, a model widely criticised for contributing to outcomes interference in the activities of local governments which led to poor service delivery, regional inequalities, and lack of local accountability, there were calls for adoption of devolution as the new development trajectory for Zimbabwe. This history of centralised control and largely ineffective decentralisation efforts forms the backdrop against which the 2013 constitutional provisions for devolution were introduced. In Zimbabwe devolution advocates were demanding for the transfer of governing power to people in the localities who are more intimate with the desires of the local people (Masunungure & Ndoma, 2013). In this context, devolution has become critical in the quest to bring the government closer to the governed. Moyo & Ncube (2014) argued that residents know what is best for themselves and given the responsibility they will deliver that and develop a sense of ownership of the process.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who succeeded President Robert Mugabe as the leader of both the government and the governing Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in November 2017, declared that his government will implement devolution and established the provincial tier of government, as required by the 2013 Constitution (The Constitution, 2013). Chimbindi (2021) posed that the majority of the populace is in agreement that devolution should be implemented without delay. The perception of the majority of Zimbabweans on devolution is that, if implemented in good faith, it can promote social, political, cultural and economic development as well as provision of services (Chimbindi, 2021). The process of turning symbolic devolution statutory articulations into concrete implementation dimensions is fraught with uncertainties and constraints, which is why Vernon Bogdanor equates devolution to a "mystery tour" (Moyo & Ncube, 2014). Hence the need to interrogate the possible challenges that have risen during the implementation of devolution that have impeded its full capacity to realisation of anticipated benefits.

The 2013 Constitution and Devolution Provisions

The 2013 Constitution represented a significant departure, at least on paper, by explicitly mandating devolution. Chapter 14 is dedicated to Provincial and Local Government, outlining a three-tier system comprising the central government, provincial and metropolitan councils (PMCs), and local authorities (urban and rural councils) (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013, Section 5). Section 264 is the cornerstone provision, stating the requirement to devolve governmental powers and responsibilities "whenever appropriate" to PMCs and local authorities deemed "competent" to execute them efficiently and effectively (Vhudzi, 2019). The objectives listed under Section 264(2) include giving powers of local governance to the people, promoting democratic participation, preserving national unity, ensuring equitable resource sharing, transferring responsibilities and resources from the national government, and promoting socio-economic development (Zinyama & Chimanikire, 2019). Moyo & Ncube (2014) also stated that devolution of power aims to statutorily transfer some political power, local policy making and administrative responsibilities and resources from central government to citizens and/or their democratically elected regional, provincial or local authorities. It can be concluded that devolution ensures accountability, transparency and equitable and just distribution of opportunities in political, economic and governance spheres.

Crucially, Section 301(3) mandates a specific fiscal dimension to devolution, requiring that "not less than five per cent of the national revenues raised in any financial year must be allocated to the provinces and local

authorities as their share in that year." This provision aimed to ensure a predictable and constitutionally guaranteed flow of funds to support devolved functions. Section 268-270 provide for the establishment and functions of Provincial and Metropolitan Councils and Section 274-276 is on local authorities, emphasizing principles of good governance, accountability, and public participation (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013).

Existing Research on Implementation Challenges

Despite the comprehensive constitutional framework, research conducted since 2013 highlights a significant gap between the constitutional provisions and the reality of implementation of devolution. Studies by Chimbindi (2021) and Chigumira et al. (2020) provide critical insights into the hurdles encountered. Chimbindi (2021) emphasizes the concept of an "unfulfilled constitutional mandate," arguing that political factors, particularly a lack of genuine political will from the ruling ZANU-PF party, coupled with perceived weaknesses and ambiguities within the constitutional text itself have significantly stalled progress. Previous studies by Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022), Muchadenyika & Williams (2018), ZEPARU (2020), Gwiza & Jarbandhan (2025) and Mapuva & Miti (2019) points to delays in legislative alignment, politicisation of the devolution discourse, and concerns over the central government's reluctance to cede power and resources.

Similarly, the ZEPARU discussion paper (Chigumira et al., 2020) focuses on the challenges and capacity gaps across all three tiers of government that undermine implementation. It highlights the critical absence of detailed policy guidelines and subsidiary legislation to operationalize the constitutional provisions, leading to confusion and difficulties, particularly in utilizing the Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfers (IGFT). The paper also notes the failure to align crucial legislation like the Public Finance Management Act and the Urban and Rural Councils Acts with the constitutional requirements for devolution. In theory, Zimbabwe's three tiers of government are predicated on a constitutional provision within which they will implement their functions in a co-operative framework in which the three tiers of government inform, consult, harmonise and co-ordinate on matters of common national and public interest is thus imagined in the new Constitution. While such co-operation among the three tiers is possible, its success or failure will depend on how an Act of Parliament (which is yet to be enacted) will define the mechanisms and procedures to facilitate co-ordination between central government, provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities (Moyo & Ncube, 2014). The current research paper details significant capacity constraints, including skills gaps, inadequate staffing, and weak coordination mechanisms between government tiers, political and economic challenges that plague the implementation of devolution.

Analysis of Specific Challenges

This section provides a detailed analysis of the specific challenges that have significantly impeded the effective implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe since the enactment of the 2013 Constitution. For the purposes of the current study the challenges in the implantation of devolution are in following categories: political, legislative and policy, fiscal, administrative and capacity, and socio-economic dimensions.

Political Challenges

A fundamental obstacle to the devolution agenda has been the apparent lack of sustained and genuine political will from the central government. Chimbindi (2021) argues that the government seems reluctant to fully embrace devolution, possibly fearing a loss of centralised control and the potential empowerment of political opposition. This reluctance manifests in various ways, including delays in enacting necessary legislation and a perceived prioritisation of consolidating power over implementing democratic reforms like devolution. Wekwete (2016) identifies this lack of political will as the single biggest challenge since 2013. The argument that devolution is primarily a matter of political will rather than simply resource availability (Chimbindi, 2021) resonates strongly with the observed inertia. Taruvinga (2023) quoted that genuine devolution is viewed as dependent on political reforms, strengthening institutional capacity, and reducing the interference of central politics in local affairs.

While the 2013 Constitution mandates devolution to empower local communities, political tribalism often characterized by Shona supremacy and the marginalization of minority groups has created deep mistrust and unequal distribution of resources (Mudau & Nyane. 2022). Chimbindi (2021) notes that the strong demand for

devolution from regions like Matabeleland, while potentially reflecting legitimate concerns about historical marginalisation and underdevelopment, has sometimes been framed in ethnic or tribal terms. This framing, whether accurate or not, may have inadvertently hindered the development of a unified national consensus and provided ammunition for those resistant to decentralising power (Moyo, 2025). This has also allowed them to portray devolution as a divisive rather than unifying force, contrary to the constitutional objective of preserving national unity (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013, Section 264(2)(b)). From the above submissions it can be concluded that tribalism significantly hinders the effective implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe by hindering equitable development.

Legislative and Policy Framework Challenges

A critical failure has been the significant delay in aligning existing legislation with the devolution provisions of the 2013 Constitution. Both Chimbindi (2021) and Chigumira et al. (2020) highlight the lack of progress in amending key Acts such as the Provincial Councils and Administration Act, the Urban Councils Act, the Rural Councils Act, and the Public Finance Management Act. This legislative inertia means that the operational framework for local governance often remains rooted in the pre-2013 centralised system, directly contradicting the constitutional intent. Chigumira et al. (2020) point out that numerous constitutional sections related to devolution (e.g., 265(3), 266(4), 270(2), 276(1)) have yet to be given practical effect through subsidiary legislation.

Compounding the legislative delays is the absence of clear, detailed national policy guidelines on devolution. Chigumira et al. (2020) identify this as a major missing link. Without such guidelines articulating the specific mandates to be devolved, the roles and responsibilities of each tier, and the mechanisms for intergovernmental relations, implementation remains ambiguous and uncoordinated. This lack of clarity creates confusion and challenges, particularly regarding the effective utilisation of allocated devolution funds (the 5% IGFT) (Chigiya-Mujeni, 2021). This also involves structuring and processing the national budget in a manner that directly speaks to a three-tier government. Zinyama and Chimanikire (2019) recommended the amendment of the Public Finance Management (PFM) Act so that it provides for the allocation of not less than 5% of national revenues raised in any financial year to Provincial and Local Authorities as is required in terms of Section 301 (3) of Constitution of Zimbabwe. The development of the legal framework that gives effect to the Provincial and Metropolitan Councils that have since been established needs to be expedited. It can be concluded that when designing a multi-tier government, it is important to ensure that there are specific rules, mechanisms and strategies to provide the accountability of all tiers of governments to the citizens.

Moreover, some analysts argue that the constitutional provisions themselves contain weaknesses that the central government can exploit. Chimbindi (2021) points to the qualifying phrases in Section 264 – devolving powers "whenever appropriate" and to authorities deemed "competent" – as potential loopholes. These qualifiers arguably leave the implementation of devolution largely at the discretion of the central government, rather than establishing it as an enforceable right. The constitution, in this view, lacks robust mechanisms to hold the government accountable for implementing devolution, making legal challenges by citizens potentially ineffective.

Fiscal Challenges

According to Section 264 (2)(a) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe introducing devolution in Zimbabwe is meant to realise a transfer of responsibilities and resources from the national government in order to establish a sound financial base for each provincial and metropolitan council and local authority. This is a form of fiscal devolution wherein local government is granted the power to manage its own finances for the benefit of that area. The overarching principle is that of ensuring that control of finances is granted to lower echelons of power so that they can spearhead development efforts without the oversight of the central government (Vhudzi, 2019). While the Constitution mandates the allocation of at least 5% of national revenues to provinces and local authorities (Section 301(3)), significant fiscal challenges persist. Chigumira et al. (2020) raise questions about the adequacy of this allocation and highlight problems with the timely disbursement and effective utilisation of these Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfers (IGFT). Delays in disbursement and inadequate allocations relative to need undermine the ability of lower tiers to plan and execute development projects. It can be argued that delays in the

disbursement of intergovernmental fiscal transfers (IGFTs) from central to local authorities frequently hinder local development, stall infrastructure projects, and cripple service delivery.

Sibanda (2013) noted that most developing countries attempt to implement policy reforms with donor funding, which is neither sufficient nor sustainable, given that most of the donations are stifled with conditionalities. Thus, devolution often has a stillbirth from lack of financial resources. The ZEPARU report references findings from the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) indicating poor corporate governance, misuse of public funds, and failure to produce timely financial statements within local authorities, suggesting existing accountability systems are weak. Concerns about the mismanagement of funds and lack of accountability are prevalent. Local authorities often face significant challenges in mobilizing their own revenue sources. Fjeldstad & Heggstad (2012) further contends that the challenge to financial autonomy of subnational governments, in developing countries, is further compounded by the absence of a substantial tax base and sound revenue system. In most of these countries only a few urban local authorities have real potential for financial freedom, the majority, of which are rural municipalities rely on central government grants (Marumahoko & Fessha, 2011). The local authorities remain heavily reliant on central government transfers and traditional sources like rates and service charges, which are often difficult to collect effectively, especially in a challenging economic environment.

Administrative and Capacity Challenges

Significant capacity gaps exist across all three tiers of government, severely hindering their ability to perform devolved functions effectively. The ZEPARU report provides a detailed assessment of these gaps. At the central government level, ministries tasked with overseeing devolution may lack the necessary policy analysis, coordination, and monitoring skills (Sibanda, 2013). (Gwiza & Jarbandhan, 2025). At the provincial and metropolitan council level, the structures themselves are not fully operational, lacking established administrative systems (Gwiza & Jarbandhan, 2025). Local authorities often suffer from a critical shortage of technical and managerial skills, particularly in areas like development planning, financial management, procurement, contract management, and monitoring and evaluation. Weak coordination mechanisms between central government (ministries), provincial councils, and local authorities further hamper effective implementation.

Lessons that can be drawn from the Ugandan situation are that for a nation to reap any benefits such as enhancement of development from running a devolved system of government it goes beyond the mere adoption of a devolved system of government (Vhudzi, 2019). In as much the adoption of a devolved system of government promises benefits the success of such is conditional on the presence of various factors that include the availability of necessary resources, the level of commitment of central government and awareness of the populace.

Socio-Economic Challenges

The implementation of devolution does not occur in a vacuum and it is significantly affected by the broader socio-economic context. The harsh macroeconomic environment prevailing in Zimbabwe for many years, characterised by high inflation, unemployment, and fiscal constraints, directly impacts the resources available for devolution and the capacity of both the state and citizens to engage effectively (Chigumira et al., 2020). Limited fiscal space restricts the central government's ability to allocate sufficient funds, while economic hardship makes it difficult for local authorities to raise own-source revenue and for citizens to pay rates and service charges. Citizen apathy is cited as another challenge to effective devolution (Vhudzi, 2019). It can be argued that devolution is often fails due to a lack of social capital between government and its citizens.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided the principal-Agent Theory which is used as a theoretical framework to explain the complex challenges hindering the effective implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe. The section now commits to explain how the theory enables a clearer understanding of the challenges being examined in this study.

Principal-Agent Theory

Principal-Agent Theory (PAT) analyses relationships where one party (the principal) delegates work or authority

to another party (the agent) to act on their behalf. Challenges arise due to potential goal divergence between the principal and agent, information asymmetry (where the agent typically possesses more information about their tasks or capabilities than the principal), and the principal's difficulty in perfectly monitoring the agent's actions and ensuring accountability (Eisenhardt, 1989; Shapiro, 2005).

In the context of Zimbabwean devolution, the central government (including key ministries like Ministry of Local Government and Public Works and Ministry of Finance, Economic Development and Investment Promotion and the executive) acts as the principal, delegating constitutional functions and resources to sub-national entities – Provincial and Metropolitan Councils (PMCs) and Local Authorities (LAs) – which act as agents. Principal-Agent Theory helps explain the lack of political will identified by Chimbindi (2021). This divergence leads the principal (central government) to be reluctant to fully empower the agent. The central government faces challenges in accurately assessing the true capacity of local authorities (Chatiza et al, 2014) and monitoring how devolved funds (the 5% Inter-Governmental Fiscal Transfer) are utilised. This asymmetry contributes to the observed accountability deficits and potential for mismanagement (Chigumira et al., 2020). The framework highlights the weaknesses in accountability mechanisms. Upward accountability (Local authorities to central government) is hampered by monitoring difficulties, while downward accountability (Local authorities to citizens) is often weak due to limited citizen participation mechanisms and capacity constraints. Principal-Agent Theory is particularly useful for the current study, it dissects the power dynamics, incentive structures, and information problems inherent in the relationship between central and sub-national government tiers, directly addressing issues of political reluctance, oversight failure, and accountability gaps observed in Zimbabwe.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a qualitative research approach to understand the challenges that have been faced during the implementation of the Devolution and Decentralisation Policy in Zimbabwe. By employing a qualitative research design, the researcher was able to thoroughly gather data through Acts, policies, government publications, earlier research, and official documents motivated by the fact that it helps in exploring the challenges that have been encountered during the implementation of the devolution agenda. The researcher made a precise selection of documents that expressed the transfer of administrative, fiscal and political responsibilities from the central government to subnational level. The researcher filtered out documents that may introduce bias and those that are not devolution oriented. The study followed clear boundaries, and only reviewed documents that maintain an analysis of the actual impacts and mechanisms of devolved governance.

Previous studies in the implementation of devolution enabled the researcher to understand the key obstacles to the full implementation of devolution. The current study reviewed the following legislation documents so as to determine the legal challenges in the implementation of devolution: The Lancaster Constitution; Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), The Devolution and Decentralisation Policy; The Rural District Councils Act (RDCA) (Chapter 29:13); The Urban Councils Act; The Provincial Councils and Administration Act; and The Traditional Leaders Act. The traditional leaders are part of the devolved structure of governance. The Traditional Leaders Act recognized Traditional leadership as an important institution of rural governance by restoring powers to allocate rural land and to try civil and criminal cases in rural areas, among other local governance obligations (Chigwata, 2010). It is from all these reviews that the researcher gained insights about the challenges in the implementation of the devolution agenda.

Summary of Findings and Overall Assessment

The implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe, despite being mandated by the 2013 Constitution and heralded as a cornerstone of governance reform, remains significantly challenged and largely unfulfilled. It can be arguably noted that the delay to align different local government pieces of legislation since the coming on board of the Constitution of Zimbabwe in 2013 has had ramifications on efficiency, effectiveness and accountability in local governance (Chimbindi, 2021). This analysis, drawing upon recent academic and policy research (Mapuva & Miti (2019), Chimbindi (2021), Zinyama, Kuwa & Manyera (2023), Pasara (2025) has identified a confluence of deeply entrenched obstacles spanning the political, legislative, fiscal, administrative, and socio-economic spheres.

Politically, a lack of sustained commitment from the central government, direct interference in sub-national affairs, has created a significant impediment. Zimbabwe is on economic sanctions from countries like the USA and the European Union affecting all three tiers of government to experience financial strain thus hindering expeditious delivery of public services. This scenario will undermine the full implementation of devolution of power as provincial and metropolitan governments. Participation of the general citizenry in the planning process is still minimal, whilst according to Chikwawawa (2019) participation accords a voice and power to local communities on issues affecting their well-being by fostering accountability of the government to the citizenry, which is a crucial ingredient and tenet of good democratic governance. However, Chimbindi (2021)'s study found that 76.7% of the respondents demonstrated a general understanding of devolution as a good concept which according to them is a good idea which brings services closer to the people while 23.3% indicated that it is a bad concept in the sense that majority would be able to lose their power and access to resources.

Legislatively, Zimbabwe's three tiers of government are predicated on a constitutional provision within which they will implement their functions in a co-operative manner. A co-operative framework in which the three tiers of government inform, consult, harmonise and co-ordinate on matters of common national and public interest is thus imagined in the new Constitution. While such co-operation among the three tiers is possible, its success or failure will depend on how an Act of Parliament, which is yet to be enacted will define the mechanisms and procedures to facilitate co-ordination between central government, provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities. The failure to align existing laws with the Constitution and the absence of clear, detailed policy guidelines have resulted in a confusing and inadequate operational framework. The delays in the alignment of various pieces of local government legislation subsequently cause delays in the implementation of devolution.

Section 301(3) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe provides that a budget of at least 5% of the national revenues raised in any financial year should be allocated to the provinces and local authorities as their share in that fiscal year (Constitution, 2013). Challenges related to the adequacy, disbursement, and management of the intergovernmental transfers, alongside the limited revenue-generating capacity of local authorities and persistent accountability deficits, undermine the financial viability of devolved governance. In order for devolution to achieve territorial justice, allocation of public expenditure to sub-governments should be based on a needs-based assessment by region and not by population (Moyo & Ncube, 2014).

The Zimbabwe Constitution Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013 provides the framework for devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities in Section 264 with tiers of government outlined in Section 5 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe. Sub-section 1 provides devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities to provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities. Devolution at provincial level has largely been undermined by the ineffective role of the Provincial and Metropolitan Councils. Little is being done to fast-track the activation of the provincial structure as given by the Constitution. This current study found that Zimbabwe has a well out-lined administrative structure of devolution, there is need for activation of all structures, strengthening and provision of adequate resources to ensure full implementation of devolution. There are critical capacity gaps in terms of skills, staffing, systems, and coordination plague all tiers of government, hindering their ability to effectively plan, manage, and implement devolved functions. Devolution should come with extensive capacity strengthening and training of political and administrative personnel at both the national and subnational government levels (Nyikadzino & Vyas Doorgapesad, 2022).

The Constitution of Zimbabwe provides all the necessary ingredients for a vibrant local governance system in the country through a devolved system of governance. Collectively, the identified challenges paint a picture of a devolution process that is stalled, caught between constitutional aspiration and practical apathy. The target of the devolution to achieve enhanced democracy, improved service delivery, and equitable development through empowered local governance structures is yet to be fully realized. The constitutional framework, while providing a foundation, appears insufficient without supporting legislative acts to compel implementation which poses a systematic weakness.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Addressing the multifaceted challenges hindering devolution requires a concerted and comprehensive approach.

Based on the analyses presented in the reviewed literature, several potential pathways emerge, although their feasibility varies. The researcher recommends the following:

Strengthening the legal and policy framework is paramount. This involves expediting the alignment of all relevant legislation (including the Provincial Councils and Administration Act, Urban Councils Act, Rural Councils Act, Public Finance Management Act, Audit Act, etc.) with the 2013 Constitution. Amending the constitution to strengthen it so that it adequately compels the government to implement devolution. Crucially, detailed policy guidelines need to be developed and disseminated, clearly outlining devolved mandates, roles, responsibilities, and intergovernmental coordination mechanisms. To achieve the desired outcomes, devolution has to be planned and executed with care and thoroughness. Addressing the pervasive capacity gaps is critical. This requires significant investment in capacity building programs targeting all tiers of government, focusing on essential skills in planning, financial management, procurement, monitoring and evaluation and project implementation.

Enhancing fiscal decentralization by ensuring adequate and timely disbursement of the Inter-governmental Fiscal Transfers, potentially reviewing distribution formulas and strengthening oversight mechanisms. The financing architecture of the devolved system of governance needs to be in place. A weak public expenditure allocation system or one that is not transparent, equitable and accountable may cripple the capacity of provincial governments to take control of formulating and implementing policies in their localities. Fostering political will and multi-stakeholder engagement is very crucial for the full implementation of devolution. Building broader national consensus on the importance and nature of devolution, moving beyond partisan, regional or ethnical framing, is essential. Provincial and local governments must be given adequate resource-raising powers to enable sustainable service delivery and the stimulation of development. Availability of resources at provincial level will enable implementation of provincial development plans. It must be noted that, effective decentralization and local autonomy require appropriate financial autonomy. The author recommends that the provincial governments be given taxing for liquor licensing, provincial road tax, tourism and animal licensing, among others which will encourage development within provinces.

The socio-political dimension in addressing the real needs and expectations of the people and emphasizing the system dynamics. Dissemination of the knowledge of devolution to the grassroots is very critical. There is also need to translate any literature about devolution into vernacular languages for easy understanding and information dissemination. The ruling party need to monitor the implementation of devolution by the government.

In conclusion, while the path to effective devolution in Zimbabwe is obstructed by formidable challenges, it remains a constitutionally mandated objective with significant potential benefits for governance and development. Overcoming the identified challenges demands enhanced political will, supported by robust legal frameworks, adequate resources, enhanced capacity, and active citizen engagement to fulfill the constitutional promise.

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