From Constitutional Promise to Developmental Practice: An Integrated Strategy for Implementing Devolution towards Achieving Vision 2030 in Zimbabwe.

Phylis Fungai Banhwa DPhil[1], Promise Machingo Hlungwani[2]

[1]Candidate at Marondera University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology.

[2]Lecturer at Marondera University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100900801

Received: 30 September 2026; Accepted: 05 October 2026; Published: 24 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution enshrines devolution as a foundational principle of democratic governance, equitable development and national unity. Section 264 commits the state to transferring governmental powers and responsibilities to provincial, metropolitan and local tiers. Section 301(3) mandates that not less than five percent of national revenues be allocated to subnational governments. The Devolution and Decentralisation Policy of 2020 further positions devolution as a pillar for achieving upper-middle-income status by 2030. Yet a wide gap remains between constitutional promise and developmental practice. Provincial councils remain largely non-operational due to the absence of enabling legislation; local authorities exercise limited autonomy under pervasive ministerial oversight; intergovernmental fiscal transfers have consistently fallen far below the constitutional threshold; and institutional capacity, monitoring systems and participatory mechanisms remain weak. Drawing on recent scholarship on Zimbabwean devolution and comparative multi-level governance theory, this paper argues that Zimbabwe will not achieve the developmental promise of devolution through isolated legal, fiscal or administrative adjustments. Reforms must be sequenced as an integrated system in which enabling law, predictable finance, protected local autonomy, administrative capacity, accountable intergovernmental relations and substantive citizen participation reinforce one another. The paper develops a five-phase reform pathway and proposes implementation priorities and indicators for assessing progress. It concludes that the central challenge is not the absence of a constitutional rationale, but the failure to convert that rationale into enforceable authority, resources and accountability at the subnational level.

Keywords: Devolution; Decentralisation; Vision 2030; Multi-Level Governance; Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfers; Local Government; Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Devolution is commonly viewed as a way of bringing government closer to communities, enhancing the delivery of public services, reducing regional disparities and ensuring that decision-making responds more effectively to local needs (Gwiza & Jahbandhan, 2025). In Zimbabwe, devolution is a constitutional commitment. Section 264 of the Constitution expresses it as an enabler of the empowerment of local communities, democratic and accountable government, national unity, community self-management, the equitable sharing of national resources and sound subnational finances as connected objectives of devolution (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). The Devolution and Decentralisation Policy of 2020 gives this commitment a developmental orientation by linking devolution to the country's ambition of becoming an upper-middle-income economy by 2030 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020).

The constitutional framework is ambitious. Section 264(2) articulates seven interconnected objectives of devolution: empowering local communities; promoting democratic, effective, transparent and accountable government; preserving national unity; recognising communities' rights to manage their own affairs; ensuring equitable sharing of local and national resources; transferring responsibilities and resources to establish a sound

financial base for subnational tiers; and enhancing participation in decision-making. The Preamble to Chapter 14 reinforces these objectives by linking devolution to the "preservation of national unity," "democratic participation in government by all citizens and communities," and "the equitable distribution of national resources" (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013).

Despite this comprehensive constitutional architecture, implementation has been persistently deficient. Mudau and Nyane (2023) argue that Zimbabwe remains trapped within a post-independence, highly centralised unitary state design despite the 2013 Constitution's devolution provisions. They identify politico-legal factors, including a lack of political will, legislative inertia and the resilience of centralist governance culture. These are identified as responsible for the non-implementation of constitutional injunctions on devolution. Chakunda and Matenga (2024) similarly find that the development of regional governments in Zimbabwe is "mired in constitutional ambiguity" arising from a vague definition of their purpose and funding, compounded by the governing party's ideological opposition to devolution as a perceived secessionist principle.

Chigwata (2018) documents how subordinate legislation, particularly the Rural District Councils Act, the Urban Councils Act, and the Provincial Councils and Administration Act, was not designed as a coherent post-2013 devolution framework and continues to preserve extensive ministerial control. The absence of a stand-alone Devolution Act and the delay in operationalising provincial and metropolitan councils deepen this problem. Provincial councils are constitutionally recognised but lack the legal and administrative conditions required to perform their functions (Chigwata, 2019).

Fiscal devolution is the practical test of political devolution. Section 301(3) requires that not less than five percent of national revenues raised in any financial year be allocated to provinces and local authorities (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). Yet according to Treasury reports to Parliament, this threshold has never been met since the introduction of intergovernmental fiscal transfers in 2019. The gap between constitutional entitlement, budget allocation and actual disbursement remains substantial. The provincial tier has received no dedicated intergovernmental fiscal transfer allocation (Chakunda, Dzingirai, & Chikerema, 2021).

This paper derives a research and policy argument from the body of scholarship on Zimbabwean devolution. Its central claim is that devolution should be treated as a system of mutually dependent reforms rather than as a collection of separate programmes. Fiscal transfers without accountability could reproduce mismanagement. Local councils without protection from arbitrary central intervention would not amount to meaningful autonomy. Public consultation without influence over decisions would produce participation in form but not in substance.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it synthesises the reform priorities identified in the literature into seven connected reform dimensions. Second, it develops an Integrated Devolution Implementation Model as a sequenced strategy for translating constitutional authority into developmental results. Third, it proposes a monitoring logic that connects legal and institutional inputs to intermediate governance outputs and, ultimately, to service delivery and local economic development outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a secondary policy analysis based primarily on the legal and conceptual sources that inform contemporary debates on Zimbabwean devolution. Its argument follows analytically and practically from the findings and recommendations of that body of work. The methodology is outlined below to ensure transparency and replicability.

2.1 Sources Consulted

The analysis drew on four categories of sources:

1. Primary legal and policy documents: The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013; the Devolution and Decentralisation Policy (2020); the Rural District Councils Act; the Urban Councils Act; the Provincial Councils and Administration Act; the Traditional Leaders Act; the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2); and the Zimbabwe Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfers System Administrative Manual.

2. Academic literature: Peer-reviewed journal articles, books and working papers on decentralisation, multi-level governance, fiscal federalism and local government reform in Zimbabwe, Africa and beyond.

3. Governmental and parliamentary records: National budget statements, Treasury reports to Parliament, Auditor-General reports, Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) reports, and ministry annual reports covering the period 2018–2025.

4. Comparative policy sources: Documentation from Kenya, South Africa and Uganda on decentralisation implementation, together with African Union and SADC policy instruments.

2.2 Search Strategy

Academic and policy sources were identified through searches of Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and the websites of the Government of Zimbabwe, the African Union, the OECD, the World Bank and the UNDP. Keywords included combinations of: *devolution Zimbabwe*; *decentralisation implementation Africa*; *intergovernmental fiscal transfers*; *multi-level governance*; *provincial councils*; *local government autonomy*; *Vision 2030 Zimbabwe*; and *fiscal decentralisation developing countries*. The search covered publications from 2000 to 2025, with emphasis on post-2013 sources to align with Zimbabwe's current constitutional dispensation.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they: (a) addressed devolution, decentralisation or local governance in Zimbabwe or comparable African contexts; (b) provided empirical evidence on implementation outcomes; or (c) offered theoretical frameworks relevant to multi-level governance and fiscal federalism. Sources were excluded if they were purely descriptive, lacked peer review (except for official government documents), or were not available in English.

2.4 Documents Reviewed

The review covered approximately 70 documents, including 15 legal and policy instruments, 35 academic articles and book chapters, 12 government and parliamentary reports, and 8 comparative or international policy documents.

2.5 Analytical Approach

The analysis followed a three-stage process. First, the analysis coded the reviewed scholarship's findings and recommendations thematically to identify recurring implementation challenges. Second, these challenges were mapped against multi-level governance theory to establish analytical connections. Third, the coded findings were synthesised into seven reform dimensions and sequenced into five implementation phases, forming the Integrated Devolution Implementation Model. The model was then tested against comparative experience from Kenya, South Africa and Uganda to assess its plausibility and transferability.

2.6 Limitations

This paper relies on secondary sources and does not present new primary data. The analysis is therefore limited by the scope and quality of available documentation. The proposed model represents an analytical synthesis rather than a formally evaluated intervention. Quantitative figures cited from secondary sources should be verified against primary Treasury and parliamentary records.

3. Devolution, Multi-Level Governance and Vision 2030

3.1 Conceptual Foundations

Devolution is more than the administrative decentralisation of government offices. It concerns the transfer of authority, responsibility and resources to subnational institutions that possess a degree of democratic legitimacy and operational autonomy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). Decentralisation may also occur through deconcentration, delegation or administrative arrangements (United

Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2000). These forms can improve coordination while leaving ultimate authority at the centre. Genuine devolution requires a more durable redistribution of decision-making power.

The distinction matters in Zimbabwe because the literature identifies a pattern of institutional presence without corresponding power. Provincial and local structures may exist, and officials may coordinate development projects, but coordination is not equivalent to autonomous decision-making. Where subnational institutions remain dependent on central approvals, central appointments, discretionary transfers or ministerial override, the system risks becoming administrative decentralisation rather than political devolution (Chigwata, 2018).

The Constitutional Court has affirmed that Chapter 14 establishes three distinctive, interdependent and interrelated tiers of government. In *Combined Harare Residents Association and Others v Minister of Local Government* (2024), the Court observed that devolution in its ordinary sense entails "the transfer of power from central government to a lower tier of government," involving a durable redistribution of decision-making authority rather than mere administrative deconcentration.

3.2 Multi-Level Governance as an Analytical Lens

Multi-level governance (MLG) theory provides a useful lens for understanding this problem. MLG theory views governance as involving interdependent actors operating across national, provincial, local and community levels (Bache & Flinders, 2004). Authority is dispersed vertically across levels and horizontally among public, private and civil-society actors. Coordination is expected to occur through negotiation, information sharing and joint problem solving rather than through unilateral command (Hooghe & Marks, 2003).

Recent scholarship applies this perspective to Zimbabwe with illuminating results. Chakunda and Matenga (2024) identify a "unitary state paradox" in which constitutional commitment to devolution coexists with a governance culture that privileges central authority. They further describe "contested MLG" as the political struggle that results when formal rules support shared authority but established institutions resist the transfer of power. Mudau and Nyane (2023) argue that this paradox is sustained by what they term the "politico-legal factors" of non-implementation: the absence of political will to align legislation, the persistence of ministerial veto powers, and the failure to establish the intergovernmental mechanisms required by Sections 265 and 267 of the Constitution.

Table 1 maps the principal MLG challenges identified in the literature against the specific Zimbabwean manifestations and the corresponding reform responses proposed in this paper.

Table 1: Multi-Level Governance Challenges and Reform Responses

MLG Dimension	Zimbabwean Manifestation	Reform Response
Vertical power dispersion	Provincial councils non-functional; ministerial override powers; central approval requirements	Enact Devolution Act; remove or limit ministerial override; operationalise provincial councils
Fiscal autonomy	Transfers below 5% constitutional threshold; delayed and unpredictable disbursements; weak own-source revenue	Meet constitutional threshold; revise allocation formula; predictable disbursement calendar; local revenue reform
Horizontal coordination	Fragmented mandates; overlapping roles between Minister of State and Ministry of Local Government	Clarify institutional roles; establish Intergovernmental Relations Act and forums
Negotiation	Limited formal mechanisms for dispute resolution between levels	Establish intergovernmental forums with published agendas and dispute resolution procedures
Accountability	Weak audit compliance; fragmented monitoring; limited citizen oversight	Harmonised M&E systems; national devolution dashboard; participatory budgeting; whistle-blower protection
Local autonomy	Councils dependent on central approvals; limited discretion over budgets and staffing	Constitutionally protected local authority; rules-based fiscal compact; capacity-building

Positioning Zimbabwe in Comparative Scholarship

The Zimbabwean case speaks to a broader body of scholarship demonstrating that decentralisation outcomes depend on institutional context, governance capacity, accountability mechanisms and complementary reforms. Manor (1999) and Smoke (2015) show that decentralisation rarely delivers developmental dividends unless local institutions possess real discretion, reliable resources and downward accountability. Falleti (2010) demonstrates that the sequencing of political, fiscal and administrative decentralisation shapes whether reform empowers local communities or entrenches elite capture. Rodden (2004) and Bird and Vaillancourt (1998) establish that fiscal decentralisation without hard budget constraints and transparent equalisation can worsen regional disparities rather than reduce them.

African experience reinforces these findings. Kenya's 2010 Constitution created 47 county governments with guaranteed revenue shares, yet implementation has been marked by delays in disbursement, capacity gaps and contested intergovernmental relations (Cheeseman, Lynch & Willis, 2016). South Africa's municipal system demonstrates that strong legal frameworks do not automatically produce local accountability where political and administrative capacity is uneven (Powell, 2012). Uganda's decentralisation programme improved service delivery in some districts but was undermined by discretionary central transfers and weakened local revenue (Francis & James, 2003). These cases suggest that devolution succeeds where legal authority, fiscal rules, capacity-building and accountability are pursued together—not sequentially in isolation.

The Integrated Devolution Implementation Model developed in this paper draws on these comparative lessons while remaining grounded in Zimbabwe's constitutional and political context. It does not propose policy transplantation but rather adaptation to local institutional realities.

3.4 Devolution and Vision 2030

This perspective fundamentally reframes how Vision 2030 should be understood. A development vision is not achieved only by national planning, infrastructure investment or macroeconomic reform. It also depends on whether institutions located close to communities can identify needs, allocate resources, implement projects, maintain infrastructure and answer to citizens. As the Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) Targeted Review Report on Zimbabwe (2026) notes, devolution is both a governance instrument and an economic strategy. Its success should be judged not by the existence of policy documents but by whether provincial and local institutions can exercise lawful authority, manage resources and deliver public value. Without functional subnational institutions, Vision 2030 risks becoming a national planning exercise detached from the local realities it is meant to transform.

4. The Implementation Problem: A National Pattern with Local Consequences

While empirical research has examined specific provinces as case studies, the implementation deficits revealed are national in scope. This section synthesises evidence from constitutional analysis, parliamentary records, audit reports and academic scholarship to identify four interconnected deficits: legal-institutional, fiscal, autonomy-related, and capacity-accountability.

4.1 A Constitutional Commitment without a Fully Operational Institutional System

Zimbabwe has a relatively clear constitutional rationale for devolution, but subordinate legislation remains inadequately aligned with the Constitution. Chigwata (2018) demonstrates that the Rural District Councils Act, the Urban Councils Act, the Provincial Councils and Administration Act and the Traditional Leaders Act were not designed as a coherent post-2013 devolution framework. Their continued centralising provisions create uncertainty about institutional mandates and preserve extensive ministerial control. The Constitutional Court in *Combined Harare Residents Association* (2024) acknowledged that Chapter 14 provides for three distinctive, interdependent and interrelated tiers of government, yet the legal operationalisation of this structure remains incomplete.

The absence of a stand-alone Devolution Act is a critical bottleneck. As Mudau and Nyane (2023) observe, the delay in enacting enabling legislation means that provincial councils—constitutionally recognised as a tier of government—lack the legal and administrative conditions required to perform their functions. The Provincial Development Committee operates mainly as a coordination mechanism under central administration rather than as an autonomous provincial planning authority. The National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2) identifies the promulgation of the Devolution Act as a priority, noting that during NDS 1 the government "was not able to fully meet this constitutional requirement" (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020).

4.2 Fiscal Dependence and the Developmental Constraint

Fiscal devolution is the practical test of political devolution. Section 301(3) of the Constitution requires that not less than five percent of national revenues raised in any financial year be allocated to provinces and local authorities (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). According to Treasury reports presented to Parliament in 2025, this threshold has never been met since the introduction of intergovernmental fiscal transfers in 2019. Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube disclosed that only 23 percent of the budgeted amount for devolution in 2023 was disbursed, with the figure dropping to 26 percent in 2024. He attributed the shortfall to "cash flow constraints, erratic revenue inflows, and poor project readiness by local authorities" (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2025).

Table 2 distinguishes between constitutional entitlement, budget allocation and actual disbursement, which are often conflated in policy discussion.

Table 2: Constitutional Entitlement, Budget Allocation and Actual Disbursement of Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfers (2019–2024)

Year	Constitutional Entitlement (5% of National Revenue)	Budget Allocation	Actual Disbursement	% of Allocation Disbursed
2019–2022 (cumulative)	5% annually	ZWL 64.7 billion (cumulative)	ZWL 7.7 billion	~12%
2023	5%	Budgeted (figure to be verified)	~23% of allocation	~23%
2024	5%	ZWL 4.1 billion (earmarked)	~26% of allocation	~26%

Note: Figures are derived from Treasury reports to Parliament and secondary sources. The distinction between allocation and disbursement is critical: even where funds are budgeted, delays and conditionalities may prevent actual transfer to subnational institutions. The original denomination of these figures should be verified against Treasury records; where figures were originally reported in Zimbabwe dollars (ZWL), they have been converted or adjusted for currency reforms. The provincial tier has received no dedicated intergovernmental fiscal transfer allocation.

The implications for Vision 2030 are direct. Chakunda, Dzingirai and Chikerema (2021) argue that the vertical fiscal imbalance is a structural issue whose antidote requires reassignment of revenue and expenditure responsibilities among governmental tiers. Their proposed fiscal capacity model incorporates five variables: total amount to be allocated as declared in the national budget, poverty index, population, size of the local economy, and the estimated intrinsic value of sub-soil natural resource endowments. The current allocation formula, by contrast, gives insufficient weight to poverty, infrastructure deficits and regional disparities. It comprises population (20%), poverty prevalence (30%) and infrastructure deficit (50%), but critics argue it does not adequately capture fiscal capacity or the cost of service provision across different settlement patterns.

The result is a cycle of dependence. The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF, 2026) reports that local authority revenue collection averages 57 percent, with 46 percent of collections absorbed by labour costs and only 11 percent available for capital expenditure. These constraints "reduce the capacity of councils to maintain services, invest in infrastructure, promote local economic development and build public trust" (CLGF, 2026). As Guzura observed, "Disbursements have been erratic. They have been delayed, or they have come with labels already attached to them. You are given money which you are already told what to use it for. So in other words, you haven't been given money" (NewsDay, 2025).

4.3 Central Control and Limited Local Autonomy

Local authorities operate under substantial central oversight. Ministerial powers to intervene in council affairs, together with approval requirements and the possibility of overriding local decisions, limit the practical meaning of local democracy. The CLGF (2026) notes that "despite constitutional recognition of devolution, LAs continue to operate in a context of centralised control, constrained fiscal space, fragmented mandates, [and] limited institutional capacity". Rural district councils and municipalities, which should be the engines of grassroots development, continue to operate under the heavy oversight of the Local Government and Public Works ministry. Their budgets, tariffs and revenue streams require ministerial approval, restricting their ability to act with autonomy.

The problem is not that central government should have no role. National government must establish standards, protect rights, equalise resources and coordinate national priorities. The problem is that oversight can become substitution: the centre makes decisions that should be made locally and then holds local institutions responsible for results they were not empowered to control. As one NewsDay editorial observed, "Without legislative alignment, local governments will remain subordinated to central ministries" (NewsDay, 2025). The Office of the President and Cabinet has itself warned line ministries against usurping the mandate of local authorities, with officials noting that "local authority resolutions were laws at the local level and that there was no need for Central Government interference" (NewsDay, 2025). Yet such warnings, however welcome, do not substitute for the legal reform required to protect subnational autonomy.

4.4 Capacity, Accountability and Participation Deficits

The capacity deficit is both human and institutional. The CLGF (2026) reports that many councils face "service delivery backlogs, ageing infrastructure, weak revenue collection, limited capital investment" and that local authority revenue collection averages 57 percent, with only 11 percent available for capital expenditure. The shortage of specialised skills in planning, engineering, auditing, financial management and monitoring and evaluation is widely documented. Councillors may lack the training required to exercise their representative and oversight roles, while technical staff may lack the resources needed to prepare credible plans, procure effectively and report on results.

Accountability systems exist but are not consistently effective. The Auditor-General's office has reported significant failures in the submission of financial statements for audit and has conducted value-for-money audits on the monitoring of devolution-funded projects by the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works (Auditor-General, 2024). The APRM Targeted Review Report (2026) notes that "expenditure controls and procurement require further strengthening" and that "consistency in following the [budget] calendar is critical for effective planning and accountability". Accountability must therefore be treated as an institutional capability, not simply as a compliance instruction.

Participation presents a similar challenge. Communities are sometimes consulted, but consultation does not necessarily mean that community priorities influence decisions. Traditional leaders may be invited to witness project commissioning without being involved in project identification and planning. Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) and Ward Development Committees (WADCOs) exist but are not consistently active in local development planning. The APRM report acknowledges that the government has "improved budget formulation with medium-term expenditure frameworks and programme-based budgeting," but notes that aspects of budgetary execution "require further strengthening" (APRM, 2026). Public participation is consequently at risk of becoming ceremonial rather than deliberative.

Recent initiatives offer some promise. In 2025, President Mnangagwa launched the Citizen Engagement and Scoring Platform, a digital system enabling residents to assess local authority performance. Online ratings submitted by citizens will account for more than 40 percent of the official performance score of the 32 urban councils and 60 rural district councils. The platform was described as "a practical expression" of the principle that "government exists to serve its people," completing "the local governance sequence by giving every Zimbabwean the opportunity to provide feedback, identify service gaps, and evaluate efficiency in real time" (Government of Zimbabwe, 2025). However, the effectiveness of such tools depends on the extent to which

citizens' feedback actually influences resource allocation and decision-making, not merely on the existence of the platform itself.

5. From Recommendations to an Integrated Reform Strategy

The body of scholarship on Zimbabwean devolution provides numerous recommendations. Their value increases when they are read as a connected reform programme. Seven dimensions are particularly important. These dimensions explain *what* should change. The five-phase pathway in Section 6 explains *how and when* reforms should occur. The evaluation logic in Section 7 explains *how progress should be assessed*.

Table 3 links the identified problems, supporting evidence, reform dimensions and implementation phases.

Table 3: Linking Problems, Evidence, Reform Dimensions and Implementation Phases

Identified Problem	Supporting Evidence	Reform Dimension	Implementation Phase
Legislative misalignment; no Devolution Act	Rural District Councils Act, Urban Councils Act etc. retain centralising provisions	Legal and institutional reconstruction	Phase 1 (Months 0–12)
Fiscal transfers below 5% threshold; delayed and unpredictable	Disbursements 12%–26% of allocations (2019–2024); provincial tier received no allocation	Predictable and equitable fiscal devolution	Phase 3 (Months 18–36)
Ministerial override; limited local autonomy	Central approval requirements; intervention powers	Autonomy with accountability	Phase 4 (Months 24–48)
Capacity deficits in planning, engineering, audit, M&E	Shortages of specialised skills; under-resourced DDC office	Capacity as an enabler of devolution	Phase 2 (Months 12–24)
Fragmented monitoring; weak audit compliance	Failures in financial statement submission	Monitoring, evaluation and learning	Phase 5 (Months 36–60)
Ceremonial participation; inactive VIDCOs/WADCOs	Consultation without influence; traditional leaders excluded from planning	Participation, civic awareness and grassroots institutions	Phase 4 (Months 24–48)
Fragmented intergovernmental coordination	Overlapping mandates; no formal dispute resolution forums	Intergovernmental relations and regional learning	Phase 4 (Months 24–48)

5.1 Legal and Institutional Reconstruction

The first priority is to make the constitutional commitment operational. A stand-alone Devolution Act should define the powers, responsibilities and financial entitlements of national, provincial, metropolitan and local

institutions. It should establish principles of subsidiarity, provide procedures for intergovernmental dispute resolution and protect subnational institutions from arbitrary interference (Mudau & Nyane, 2023).

The Act must be accompanied by the alignment of the Rural District Councils Act, the Urban Councils Act, the Provincial Councils and Administration Act and the Traditional Leaders Act. Alignment should remove contradictions and clauses that permit unrestricted ministerial intervention. The Provincial and Metropolitan Councils Administration Bill should also be enacted so that the second tier of government has a clear operational basis. The Intergovernmental Relations Act, required by Section 265 of the Constitution, should establish mechanisms for coordination among central government, provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities (Chigwata, 2019).

Legal reform should be supported by parliamentary oversight. A dedicated Parliamentary Thematic Committee on Devolution would provide a focal point for reviewing legislation, scrutinising budgets and tracking implementation. This committee should publish regular progress reports and hold relevant ministries accountable for delays in meeting statutory and constitutional obligations.

5.2 Predictable and Equitable Fiscal Devolution

The second priority is to establish a credible fiscal compact between central and subnational government. The constitutional five-percent minimum should be met as a baseline, not treated as an aspirational ceiling. Transfers should be released through a predictable calendar and recorded transparently in budget and expenditure documents. The APRM Targeted Review Report (2026) confirms that the National Treasury has been "allocating and distributing not less than 5% of collected revenues to eligible sub-national tiers of Government through the intergovernmental fiscal transfer system," but actual disbursements have consistently fallen short. The distinction between allocation and disbursement must be closed.

The allocation formula should move beyond its current components. Chakunda, Dzingirai and Chikerema (2021) propose a fiscal capacity model incorporating poverty index, population, size of the local economy and natural resource endowments. The formula should be reviewed periodically through a transparent process involving provinces, local authorities, civil society and technical experts. This would reduce discretionary allocation and improve the legitimacy of fiscal equalisation.

Provincial and metropolitan councils must receive dedicated allocations. Otherwise, the provincial tier will remain responsible for planning and coordination without the resources to perform either function effectively. At the local level, councils should be supported to modernise billing, improve revenue administration, develop appropriate public-private partnerships and restore or replace revenue sources that were transferred away from them. The CLGF (2026) SLAISE project aims to achieve "up to a 30% increase in revenue performance" through improved budgeting and reduced audit backlogs, demonstrating that targeted capacity support can yield measurable results.

5.3 Autonomy with Accountability

Devolution should not be framed as a choice between central control and unregulated local discretion. The appropriate goal is autonomy with clear accountability. Central government should set national standards, enforce constitutional rights, equalise resources and intervene when there is demonstrable failure or abuse. It should not routinely substitute its decisions for those of elected councils.

The boundary between legitimate national oversight and illegitimate administrative interference must be clarified in law. As the Office of the President and Cabinet has itself acknowledged, local authority resolutions are "laws at the local level", and there is "no need for Central Government interference" in matters that fall within council mandates (NewsDay, 2025). The Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution and the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works must have a clear division of responsibilities specifying who coordinates, who funds, who regulates, who implements and who accounts. The principle should be simple: decisions should be taken at the lowest level that has the competence and resources to take them effectively.

Autonomy must be matched by transparent financial management. The Zimbabwe Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfers System Administrative Manual should be implemented consistently. Councils should receive technical support to meet audit requirements, while persistent misuse or non-compliance should produce proportionate consequences. The APRM report notes that the manual "covers six major areas—tiers of government, grants allocation criteria, eligible expenditures, institutional framework for managing, financial management framework and monitoring and evaluation"—and that local authorities face challenges "ranging from project conceptualisation, appraisal, implementation, contract management, monitoring and evaluation as well as accounting and reporting" (APRM, 2026). Addressing these capacity gaps is essential to making autonomy work.

5.4 Capacity as an Enabler of Devolution

The CLGF (2026) notes that "despite constitutional recognition of devolution, LAs continue to operate in a context of centralised control, constrained fiscal space, fragmented mandates, [and] limited institutional capacity to drive territorial development". Capacity building must therefore be a national priority supported by universities and training institutions. The programme should focus on planning, engineering, procurement, auditing, financial management, local economic development, participatory governance and monitoring and evaluation.

Councillor training is particularly important because councillors connect democratic representation to administrative oversight. Training should be continuous and practical, covering the interpretation of budgets, development planning, procurement oversight, ethics, conflict of interest, public participation and the use of performance information. The CLGF's SLAISE project aims to equip "at least 100 senior officials with essential skills in leadership, public financial management and value-chain facilitation" (CLGF, 2026). Such initiatives should be scaled nationally.

The District Development Coordinator's office should be strengthened with adequate funding, logistics and technical staff. Its oversight role should be institutionally independent from the councils it supervises. This does not require creating another layer of control; it requires ensuring that supervision is impartial, technically credible and focused on support as well as compliance.

5.5 Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Harmonised monitoring and evaluation systems, standardised databases, compatible reporting tools and stronger professional capacity are essential. These reforms should be organised around a results chain. The relevant question is not simply whether a transfer was disbursed or a project was commissioned. It is whether the intervention improved access, quality, reliability, inclusion or local economic opportunity.

A national devolution dashboard could report a limited number of indicators. These should include the proportion of national revenue transferred; the timeliness of disbursements; provincial and local budget execution; audit submission and resolution rates; council revenue performance; service delivery measures; public participation rates; and the number of council decisions overturned by central authorities. The dashboard should be disaggregated by province and local authority and made accessible to citizens. The APRM report notes that "public reporting is essential" and that "when data remain inside ministries, citizens and councils cannot use them to hold institutions accountable or improve practice" (APRM, 2026).

Learning requires more than reporting upwards. Provincial and local institutions should use monitoring findings to revise plans, reallocate resources and improve implementation. Intergovernmental forums should review performance collectively, allowing successful practices to be adapted across districts rather than remaining isolated.

5.6 Participation, Civic Awareness and Grassroots Institutions

Participatory budgeting, community scorecards and citizen feedback mechanisms should be institutionalised in local planning and budgeting calendars. The Citizen Engagement and Scoring Platform launched in 2025

represents a significant step in this direction, with citizen ratings accounting for more than 40 percent of official council performance scores. A community meeting is meaningful when participants receive information in advance, can propose priorities, understand the available budget and are informed about how their proposals were accepted, modified or rejected. The Devolution and Decentralisation Policy should be translated into vernacular languages and distributed in accessible formats. Civic education should explain what devolution means, which institution is responsible for which service, how citizens can participate and how complaints can be pursued. Awareness is a condition of accountability: citizens cannot monitor powers or funds they do not know exist.

VIDCOs, WADCOs and traditional leaders should be integrated into planning without displacing elected councils or creating parallel authority structures. Their role should be clearly defined around community needs assessment, project prioritisation, local oversight and social accountability. The CLGF (2026) explicitly includes "traditional leadership integration and downward accountability in local governance" among its objectives, recognising that traditional leaders "occupy a pivotal role in conflict resolution, environmental stewardship, community mobilisation and preservation of Zimbabwean identity". Inclusion should also be attentive to women, young people, persons with disabilities and marginalised settlements.

5.7 Intergovernmental Relations and Regional Learning

The Constitution requires mechanisms for coordination among central government, provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). The Intergovernmental Relations Act, mandated by Section 265, should establish formal intergovernmental forums to secure vertical and horizontal coordination, information sharing, joint planning and dispute resolution. Forums should meet at national, provincial and local levels. Their agendas should be publicly available, and their decisions should identify responsible institutions, timeframes and reporting requirements. Coordination should not become a substitute for devolution. Its purpose is to help institutions exercise their distinct powers coherently.

Zimbabwe can also draw lessons from the experiences of other African countries. Kenya's devolution experience, now more than a decade old, offers instructive parallels. Patrick Karanja, Acting Director for Intergovernmental Relations in Kenya's Ministry of Devolution, has emphasised that "just having the concept of devolution in the constitution is not enough as the constitutional provisions should be accompanied by enabling acts that truly lead to a devolved state" (Karanja, 2025). He notes that devolution "could transform political culture" and that in Kenya, "you can never tell which party runs which county unless you are told," with counties controlled by the opposition working "very well with the central government to achieve development". Karanja's lessons for Zimbabwe include: ensuring devolution is accepted by all parties; providing clarity on resources devolved to provinces; ensuring functions of central and devolved governments are clearly defined; and continuous capacity building for devolved provinces. He also stresses that "accountability is very key in ensuring the economic transformation of communities" (Karanja, 2025).

South Africa's experience with local government autonomy offers both positive and cautionary lessons. The South African Constitutional Court has developed extensive jurisprudence on the obligation to facilitate public participation in policy formulation and law-making processes. Zimbabwe can draw on this jurisprudence to strengthen its own participatory governance framework. Regional engagement through SADC and the African Union can support peer learning, technical assistance and alignment with the African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development (African Union, 2014). Comparative learning is most useful when it is adapted to Zimbabwe's constitutional, political and fiscal context.

6. A Five-Phase Pathway to Implementation

The Integrated Devolution Implementation Model proposes a five-year sequence. The sequence is important because reforms have dependencies. The timing proposed below derives from three sources: (a) comparative experience from Kenya, South Africa and Uganda, where legal and fiscal reforms typically required 12–24 months to enact and operationalise; (b) existing policy commitments in Zimbabwe, including the Devolution and Decentralisation Policy (2020) and the constitutional requirement for provincial councils; and (c) the

analytical judgement of the thesis author regarding institutional dependencies—for example, fiscal reform requires legal authority and administrative capacity to be in place first. The phases are indicative and should be adjusted according to political and economic conditions.

Table 4 summarises the principal responsible actors and measurable milestones for each phase.

Table 4: Five-Phase Implementation Pathway with Responsible Actors and Milestones

Phase	Timeline	Principal Responsible Actors	Measurable Milestones
Phase 1: Legal Foundation	Months 0–12	Ministry of Justice; Parliament; Ministry of Local Government; Provincial Councils	Devolution Act enacted; Provincial and Metropolitan Councils Administration Bill passed; Parliamentary Thematic Committee established; grassroots planning structures revitalised
Phase 2: Administrative Capacity	Months 12–24	Public Service Commission; universities; Ministry of Local Government; RDCs	National capacity-building programme launched; 80% of councillors trained; technical staff recruited; financial management systems standardised
Phase 3: Fiscal Reform	Months 18–36	Ministry of Finance; Treasury; provincial councils; local authorities	5% constitutional threshold met; allocation formula revised and published; provincial allocations disbursed; local revenue reforms implemented
Phase 4: Governance Consolidation	Months 24–48	President's Office; Ministry of Local Government; intergovernmental forums; civil society	Ministerial override powers removed/limited; participatory budgeting institutionalised; Intergovernmental Relations Act operational; dispute resolution procedures active
Phase 5: Learning and Sustainability	Months 36–60	Independent evaluators; Parliament; provincial councils; regional partners	Independent evaluation completed; devolution dashboard published; peer review mechanism operational; policy refinements adopted

6.1 Phase One: Establish the Legal Foundation (Months 0–12)

Government and Parliament should enact the Devolution Act and the Provincial and Metropolitan Councils Administration Bill, begin the systematic alignment of local government laws, operationalise provincial and metropolitan councils and establish the Parliamentary Thematic Committee. Grassroots planning structures should be revitalised at the same time so that institutional reform is connected to community participation. This phase is the foundation for all subsequent reforms. Without it, fiscal transfers, capacity building and participatory mechanisms will lack legal certainty.

6.2 Phase Two: Build Administrative Capacity (Months 12–24)

This phase should establish the national capacity-building programme, implement councillor training, recruit technical staff and strengthen the District Development Coordinator's office. Financial management, procurement, audit and monitoring systems should be standardised. Capacity investments should be targeted according to assessed gaps rather than distributed as uniform training packages. The CLGF's SLAISE project provides a model for targeted, results-oriented capacity support that could be scaled nationally.

6.3 Phase Three: Reform Fiscal Arrangements (Months 18–36)

The five-percent constitutional threshold should be achieved, the allocation formula should be revised and provincial allocations should begin. Government should publish the formula, the annual allocation, the disbursement schedule and the actual transfers. Local revenue reforms should be implemented alongside intergovernmental transfers so that councils have both external support and strengthened internal fiscal capacity. The APRM report notes that "consistency in following the [budget] calendar is critical for effective planning and accountability" and that the manual governing fiscal transfers should be consistently applied (APRM, 2026).

6.4 Phase Four: Consolidate Governance (Months 24–48)

The roles of the Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution and the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works should be clarified. Ministerial override powers should be removed or tightly limited by law. Participatory budgeting, community scorecards and citizen feedback systems should become regular features of the local governance cycle. The Intergovernmental Relations Act and formal forums should be operational. This phase should also include the publication of comparative performance data across provinces and local authorities.

6.5 Phase Five: Institutionalise Learning and Sustainability (Months 36–60)

The final phase should focus on performance review, independent evaluation, public reporting and refinement of the reform system. The emphasis should shift from establishing structures to improving outcomes. Provinces and local authorities should compare performance, identify bottlenecks and revise policies based on evidence. Regional partnerships should be used to deepen technical learning rather than to replace domestic institutional responsibility.

The phases should not be interpreted as rigid silos. Fiscal reform will begin before all capacity problems are solved, and participation should start immediately. The sequence identifies lead priorities and dependencies, not a reason to postpone reforms that can begin at once.

7. An Evaluation Logic for Devolution and Vision 2030

A credible strategy requires measurable tests. The following evaluation logic translates the reform priorities into four levels of assessment.

7.1 Legal and Institutional Level

Progress should be measured by the enactment and alignment of legislation, the operational status of provincial councils, the clarity of institutional mandates and the frequency with which central authorities override local decisions. The desired direction is a complete legal framework, functional provincial institutions and fewer instances of discretionary central intervention. The APRM report provides a useful benchmark: it calls for "the promulgation of the Devolution Act to operationalise the Provincial and Metropolitan Councils" and "the formulation of legislation that clearly articulates the powers of Provincial and Metropolitan Councils" (APRM, 2026).

7.2 Fiscal and Administrative Level

Indicators should include the share of national revenue transferred, the timeliness and predictability of disbursements, the proportion of funds reaching provinces and local authorities, own-source revenue performance, audit compliance, technical staffing and councillor training. The purpose is to test whether subnational institutions possess the resources and skills needed to exercise their responsibilities. The 2025 Treasury estimates provide a baseline: allocations from 2019 to 2022 totalled ZWL 64.7 billion, but disbursements were only ZWL 7.7 billion—12 percent of the total. Closing this gap is the primary fiscal test.

7.3 Governance Level

Indicators should include the number and quality of intergovernmental forums, the resolution of disputes, the publication of budgets and performance reports, citizen participation in planning and budgeting, the operation of VIDCOs and WADCOs, and the participation of traditional leaders and other community actors. The goal is not maximum meeting activity; it is accountable and influential participation. The Citizen Engagement and Scoring Platform provides a mechanism for measuring citizen perceptions of council performance, with online ratings accounting for more than 40 percent of official scores.

7.4 Developmental Outcome Level

Evaluation should examine changes in service access, infrastructure completion and maintenance, local economic activity, resilience to shocks, equity between districts and public perceptions of responsiveness. These outcomes should be interpreted carefully because they are influenced by national economic conditions and factors beyond devolution. Nevertheless, without outcome measures, the reform could become a compliance exercise detached from citizen welfare. The CLGF SLAISE project's focus on "inclusive territorial economic development" and "better services, jobs, livelihoods and community resilience" provides a useful outcome framework (CLGF, 2026).

The evaluation system should combine administrative records, independent audits, community scorecards, citizen surveys and qualitative learning reviews. Public reporting is essential. The APRM report emphasises that "public reporting is essential" and that data should not remain confined within ministries (APRM, 2026).

DISCUSSION

8.1 Theoretical Implications

The analysis demonstrates that Zimbabwe's implementation gap is not simply a technical problem. It reflects the interaction of law, resources, political incentives, organisational capacity and governance culture. This is why a new law alone will not solve the problem. The law must change the incentives and relationships that have allowed centralised practices to continue despite constitutional provisions.

The Zimbabwean case contributes to multi-level governance theory in three ways. First, it demonstrates that constitutional devolution does not automatically produce MLG. Formal authority may be dispersed on paper while remaining concentrated in practice. The "unitary state paradox" captures this tension: a constitution can commit to shared authority while a governance culture continues to privilege central control. This finding extends Hooghe and Marks's (2003) typology by showing that MLG is not simply a matter of institutional design but of political contestation and institutional behaviour.

Second, the case shows that fiscal dependence is a critical mechanism through which vertical power dispersion is undermined. When subnational institutions lack reliable own-source revenue and depend on discretionary central transfers, they cannot exercise meaningful autonomy regardless of their formal legal status. This reinforces Rodden's (2004) argument that fiscal decentralisation without hard budget constraints and predictable equalisation can reproduce central dominance.

Third, the case demonstrates that accountability must be treated as an institutional capability rather than a compliance requirement. Fragmented monitoring, weak audit compliance and ceremonial participation are not merely technical failures; they reflect deeper gaps in the relationships between citizens, councils and central government. Strengthening accountability requires investment in data systems, citizen awareness and safe channels for reporting irregularities.

8.2 Limitations

This paper has three principal limitations. First, it relies on secondary sources and does not present new primary data. The findings are therefore bounded by the scope and quality of available documentation. Second, the proposed model has not been formally evaluated. Its phases and milestones represent an analytical synthesis that requires empirical testing. Third, the analysis focuses primarily on national-level evidence and the Mashonaland East case. While the findings are likely to resonate with other provinces, the specific political and institutional dynamics may vary.

8.3 Transferability beyond Zimbabwe

The Integrated Devolution Implementation Model may offer lessons for other African countries pursuing devolution. The model's core insight—that legal, fiscal, administrative and democratic reforms must be sequenced as an integrated system—is relevant wherever decentralisation is contested by central actors or

undermined by capacity gaps. However, transferability depends on context. Countries with different constitutional arrangements, party systems or fiscal capacities may require different sequencing. The model should therefore be adapted rather than transplanted. As Karanja observed in the Kenyan context, devolution has not fragmented the state but has instead transformed political culture, with counties controlled by opposition parties working effectively with the central government (Karanja, 2025). This suggests that the political dynamics of devolution are as important as its technical design.

CONCLUSION

The evidence from constitutional analysis, parliamentary records, audit reports and academic scholarship provides more than a list of administrative improvements. Taken together, it offers a reform theory for closing Zimbabwe's devolution implementation gap. The theory is straightforward: constitutional authority must be made legally enforceable; legal authority must be matched by predictable and equitable finance; finance must be supported by institutional capacity; autonomy must be protected from unnecessary central interference; and all of these arrangements must be subjected to public participation and accountability.

The Integrated Devolution Implementation Model strengthens this argument by sequencing reform over five phases. Its central lesson is that devolution fails when its components are pursued in isolation. A provincial council without a legal mandate, budget or staff cannot plan. A transfer without an allocation formula or audit system cannot guarantee equity. A consultation without decision-making influence cannot create democratic ownership.

Achieving Vision 2030 through devolution therefore requires a change in the practice of governance, not only a change in policy language. Zimbabwe must move from constitutional aspiration to operational authority, from discretionary administration to rules-based intergovernmental relations and from centralised control to accountable multi-level governance. The experience of other African countries—particularly Kenya's decade of devolution and South Africa's constitutional jurisprudence on participatory governance—offers both inspiration and caution. The national task is to turn the constitutional promise of devolution into a coordinated programme of legal, fiscal, administrative and democratic reform.

REFERENCES

1. African Union. (2014). African Charter on the values and principles of decentralisation, local governance and local development. African Union.
2. Auditor-General. (2024). Report of the Auditor-General on the monitoring of devolution-funded projects by the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works. Government of Zimbabwe.
3. Bache, I., & Flinders, M. (Eds.). (2004). Multi-level governance. Oxford University Press.
4. Bird, R. M., & Vaillancourt, F. (Eds.). (1998). Fiscal decentralisation in developing countries. Cambridge University Press.
5. Chakunda, V., Dzingirai, C., & Chikerema, A. (2021). Modelling intergovernmental fiscal equalisation in Zimbabwe: Towards resolving vertical and horizontal fiscal imbalances. Public Finance Quarterly, 2021(4), 535–554.
6. Chakunda, V., & Matenga, G. (2024). Interrogating the feasibility and efficacy of devolved regional governments in Zimbabwe. Territory, Politics, Governance, 1–24.
7. Cheeseman, N., Lynch, G., & Willis, J. (2016). Decentralisation in Kenya: The governance of governors. Journal of Modern African Studies, 54(1), 1–35.
8. Chigwata, T. C. (2018). Provincial and local government reform in Zimbabwe: An analysis. Community Law Centre.
9. Chigwata, T. C. (2019). Decentralisation and constitutionalism in Zimbabwe: Can the Leviathan be tamed? In C. M. Fombad & N. Steytler (Eds.), Decentralization and constitutionalism in Africa (pp. 1–30). Oxford University Press.
10. Commonwealth Local Government Forum. (2026). Stronger Local Authorities for Inclusive and Sustainable Economies (SLAISE) Project Factsheet. CLGF.

11. Falleti, T. G. (2010). Decentralisation and subnational politics in Latin America. Cambridge University Press.
12. Francis, P., & James, R. (2003). Balancing rural poverty reduction and citizen participation: The contradictions of Uganda's decentralisation program. World Development, 31(2), 325–337.
13. Government of Zimbabwe. (2013). Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013. Government Printers.
14. Government of Zimbabwe. (2020). Devolution and Decentralisation Policy. Government of Zimbabwe.
15. Government of Zimbabwe. (2025). Citizen Engagement and Scoring Platform launch statement. Ministry of Local Government and Public Works.
16. Gwiza, A., & Jarbandhan, V.D.B. (2025). Devolution of Power and Public Service Delivery in Zimbabwe: An Elusive Dream? African Journal of Public Administration and Environmental Studies. Vol 4 (3).
17. Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2003). Unravelling the central state, but how? Types of multi-level governance. American Political Science Review, 97(2), 233–243.
18. Karanja, P. (2025). Interview on Kenya's devolution experience and lessons for Zimbabwe. NewsDay.
19. Manor, J. (1999). The political economy of democratic decentralisation. World Bank.
20. Mudau, P., & 'Nyane, H. (2023). A critical analysis of Zimbabwe's non-implementation of constitutional injunctions on devolution. SA Public Law, 38(1), 1–25.
21. NewsDay. (2025, September 29). Devolution in Zimbabwe: Promises, progress and pitfalls. NewsDay.
22. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2019). Making decentralisation work: A handbook for policy-makers. OECD Publishing.
23. Parliament of Zimbabwe. (2025). Treasury report on intergovernmental fiscal transfers disbursements, 2019–2024. Parliament of Zimbabwe.
24. Powell, D. (2012). Imperfect transition – local government reform in South Africa 1994–2012. In S. Booysen (Ed.), Local elections in South Africa: Parties, people, politics (pp. 11–30). SUN Press.
25. Republic of Zimbabwe. (2026). Africa Peer Review Mechanism Targeted Review Report: Zimbabwe. APRM.
26. Rodden, J. (2004). Comparative federalism and decentralization: On meaning and measurement. Comparative Politics, 36(4), 481–500.
27. Smoke, P. (2015). Rethinking decentralisation: Assessing challenges to a popular public sector reform. Public Administration and Development, 35(2), 97–112.
28. United Nations Development Programme. (2000). The impact of participation in local governance: A synthesis of nine case studies. Management Development and Governance Division.