

# BARRIERS FACED BY RESIDENTS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT PARTICIPATION; A CASE OF BINDURA, ZIMBABWE

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## ABSTRACT

*This is part of a broad research that sought to find out the levels of participation of residents in local governance. This paper looks at the residents' perceptions of barriers they face in attempts to participate in local governance. The study was carried out against a background of a perception that during the last decade service delivery by local authorities in Zimbabwe has declined drastically. Although many factors could be attributed to this decline, it can be argued that people's participation in the local governance processes has also reduced drastically resulting in misplaced priorities by the local authorities. The study adopted both qualitative and quantitative approaches focusing on Bindura Municipality as the study location. The study used the quota sampling method where research participants were drawn from high, middle and low density suburbs. Fifteen participants were drawn from each type of the suburbs in Bindura. The study sample consisted of Bindura residents, counselors and residents associations' representatives. The research used questionnaires as research instruments. The study found out that the main barriers faced by residents in participating in local government issues included lack of consultation, invitations being improperly made, bad timing of meetings, meetings yielding no tangible results and poor organization of meetings. The study recommends that counselors be trained in ways of organizing meetings, setting out of ward structures to organize meetings and involving residents in organizing meetings and other developmental initiatives.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Barriers, perceptions, participation, local governance, local authorities.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwe governance system provides citizens with the opportunity to elect their representative in local government structures. This opportunity facilitates a link between residents and their local authority and thus, it is expected that the elected councilor, as the people's representative in a given ward, would present issues and people's priorities to the local authorities on behalf of the residents. This process however can only be effective when the residents have the opportunity to present their submissions to their representative, in most cases through consultative meetings. When residents do not have confidence in the local governance system they may see no reasons in taking part. It is the intention of this study to find out the perceptions of barriers as viewed by residents that make it difficult for them to participate in local governance. .

## RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the barriers faced by residents in local government participation?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Concept of Local Governance

In recent years, Governments have progressively sought to engage citizens in the governance of their communities and neighbourhoods. Increasing participation at the community level, it is argued, is good for improving and targeting local service delivery, empowering communities, raising local accountability and developing cohesive communities in pursuit of citizen well-being and better governance (Rai, 2008)

Local government is a product of devolution as a dimension of decentralisation. Gomme (1987:1) defines local government as,

...that part of the whole government of a nation or state which is administered by authorities subordinate to state authority, but elected independently of control by the state authority, by qualified persons resident or having property in certain localities which have been formed by communities having a common interest and common history (Gomme, 1987 in Chikerema, 2013:87).

Meyer (1978:10) defines local government as,

...local democratic governing unity within the unitary democratic system of a country, which are subordinate members of the government vested with prescribed, controlled governmental powers and sources of income to render specific local services and develop, control and regulate the geographic, social and economic environment of defined local area (Meyer, 1978 in Chikerema, 2013:87).

One has to note that whilst local governments are actually not independent of central government control, they enjoy only relative autonomy due to the division of responsibilities for services between central and local government and it should be captured that the division of these responsibilities is a political or policy issue. According to Mawhood (1993:66) local government is the third tier or level of government deliberately created to bring government closer to the grassroots population and gives these grassroots structures a sense of involvement in the political processes that control their daily lives. Chikerema (2013) asserts that the existence of local government has always been defended on the basis that it is a crucial aspect of the process of democratisation and intensification of mass participation in the decision making process. It is furthermore argued that no political system is considered to be complete and democratic if it does not have a system of local government.

In traditional representative democracy, elected representatives are the ones expected to make decisions on behalf of the people, who in turn hold them accountable at times of elections.

Decisions and policies in turn are carried out by rational bureaucracies, occupied by specialists whose expertise is the basis of their legitimacy. In more participatory approaches, both the elected and the bureaucratic forms of representation and legitimacy are challenged, as communities and their leaders are invited into (or demand) more direct forms of engagement. Conflicts emerge over who speaks for whom, and with what authority, and about the appropriate relationship between the 'governors' and the 'governed' (Goventa, 2004). However, the principles of citizen engagement being advocated across government departments are increasingly being incorporated into local government and partnership strategies for local service delivery, community cohesion, race equality, neighbourhood renewal and devolving power at a local level (Rai, 2008).

### Levels of Participation

According to Maribyrnong City Council (2014) citizen engagement can take many forms. Examples include:

- Volunteering time to be on decision-making committees and boards (at schools or community centres),
- Attending public meetings and consultations, and being involved in responding to local decisions and issues,
- Being a part of formal Council processes (for example, sitting on advisory committees and other structures), and
- Communicating with Councillors to convey concerns about matters that have a personal impact (Maribyrnong City Council, 2014:1)

Greater emphasis has to be on the importance of participation not only to hold others accountable, but also as a self-development process, starting with the articulation of grassroots needs and priorities, and building popular forms of organization (Goventa and Valderrama, 1999). Citizen participation in this sense involves direct ways in which citizens' influence and exercise control in governance, not only through the more traditional forms of indirect representation.

Hart (1992) cited by the Civic Education and Community Mobilization (CIVCOM) (2003) provides a typology of eight levels of participation as listed:

1. **Manipulation** – The individual does what those with authority/power suggest that they do, but they have no real understanding of the issues. The individuals are asked what they think and the person with authority listens to some of the ideas but they do not tell them what influence they have on the final outcome.
2. **Decoration** – The individual takes part in an event, but they really do not understand the issues.
3. **Tokenism** – The individuals are asked to say what they think about an issue but have little or no choice about the way they express those views or the scope of the ideas they can express.

4. **Assigned but not informed** – Those with authority take the initiative to call in others, but the individual only decides whether to take part after being informed on the “how and why” of the project.
5. **Consulted and informed** – The individual works as a consultant in a project that is designed and run by those with authority, but the individual understands the process and their opinions are treated seriously.
6. **Authority-initiated, shared decisions with others** – Those with authority, involve others in a project, where important decisions require consensus between them.
7. **Initiated and directed by those with less authority** – Those with less initial authority conceive, organize, and direct a project themselves without interference from those with more power.
8. **Shared decisions** – Decisions shared by those with more and less initial power, is the final goal of genuine participation.

Source: Adapted from Hart (1992) *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF, *Innocent Essays in CIVCOM* (2003:28).

The researcher used Hart's “ladder of participation” in analyzing data on the levels of participation by residents.

Makumbe (1996) notes that participatory development can be represented as a continuum of participation levels from passive participation, where donor or government initiated ideas are promoted, to active participation where the recipients are involved in all stages of a development project, including the evaluation. Makumbe (1996:61) concludes that, “local government structures in Zimbabwe, fail dismally to facilitate meaningful beneficiary participation in development”. The United Nations publication as cited in Makumbe (1996) observed that active participation requires time to attend meetings, vote and inform oneself about issues. Active participation goes beyond mere choice making from predetermined alternatives. Passive participation largely pertains to such choice making and even manipulation of the masses by those who will have critical decisions in the first place. According to the United Nations (1967) in Chikerema (2013:87) if people are continuously expected to be passive recipients of government programs, policy and projects, they tend to shun participation and lose interests in the programmes which lead to failure and underdevelopment of local communities.

Rai (2008) asserts that participation is strongly influenced by the motivations, current circumstances and backgrounds of individuals, which determine whether governance opportunities are taken up. This assertion leads to the question of the nature of people who participate in local governance.

### **Participants in Local Governance.**

A study conducted by Rai (2008) in Birmingham, revealed that across all wards, descriptions of the types of people that were more likely to participate in formal governance structures included:

- people engaging in their professional capacity, e.g. local government officials, police officers, health professionals, teachers, etc.;
- those holding elected office, e.g. councillors, MPs;
- community workers and activists;
- the politically motivated, committed party supporters (Rai, 2008:88)

Along similar lines, previous research suggested that ‘wealthy executives’ and ‘prosperous professionals’ were more likely to engage in civic activities than those with no formal qualifications or in routine occupations. There were, however, also some negative undertones, with not infrequent references to individuals described as ‘the usual suspects’, ‘do-gooders’, ‘busybodies’ and ‘those with axes to grind’ (DCLG, 2006c in Rai, 2008)

### **Barriers to Citizen Participation in Local Governance**

The apparent gap between the promise of enhanced participation through democratic decentralization on the one hand, and the everyday realities of participatory politics on the other, suggests the need to understand more fully the barriers and dynamics to participation in local governance, as well as the enabling factors and methods that can be used to overcome them. Gaventa and Valderrama (1999:89) say, “While a number of studies have now been done on decentralisation, we have found few studies which have focused on understanding the nature, dynamics and methods of participation in this new context”. This motivated the researcher to focus on the levels and dynamics of participation in local governance. Various studies have been conducted on the barriers to participation however, Rai (2008) argues that findings of researches conducted in different areas are not likely to be similar because of the differences in contexts, including leadership of the local authorities. Rai (ibid) established the listed barriers:

- the prohibitive culture of governance;
- meeting times, location and awareness;
- personal circumstances, attributes and skill;
- faith-related ideological conflicts (Rai, 2008:15)

Participants’ main concern was not so much the lack of opportunity but rather the prohibitive culture that surrounded citizen governance. Some of the recurring themes hindering effective and broader participation were seen to be:

- complicated and inaccessible structures;
- excessive and restrictive bureaucracy;
- impersonal management and leadership;
- obstructive red tape and confusing jargon (Rai, 2008:17)

An anecdote captured from one of the respondents says, “In some meetings for the community, the counselors all shout up and it is intimidating! In some meetings, people aren’t allowed to have a different identity, so people don’t speak up.” (Rai, 2008:18). It can be deduced from this statement that some of the opportunities availed to participate in governance may not arrive at the ideal outcomes due to intimidating atmosphere.



Past failures, lack of response to issues previously raised and fruitless consultations had contributed to the cynicism about formal governance and the individuals charged with making things happen. The intentions of authorities to involve and consult with communities were sometimes perceived as being no more than “tick-box” exercises where the outcomes had already been determined (Rai, 2008:19)

The lack of engagement was often attributed to the existence of a communication and information gap. A school governor pointed out ‘there’s not much advertised by the council for getting people to come forward and sit on a panel’ (Rai, 2008:20).

The Maribyrnong City Council (2014) professes that whilst not everyone needs or wants to be engaged in civic life and local governance the opportunity to participate should be available to all; barriers that make it harder for some groups to participate need to be addressed. Information about opportunities for becoming involved may not be readily available and supporting processes can be inadequate, particularly for those who experience socio-economic disadvantage or are socially marginalised. When they form part of a social inclusion agenda, strategies to enhance citizen engagement and address barriers to participation can strengthen the involvement of groups that feel disconnected from local decision-making (Maribyrnong City Council, 2014:1)

The fundamental problem of decentralized local governance in developing countries is the fear of national leaders that the transfer of power represents a zero-sum game in which local leaders (who might also be politicians in a different party) gain power and resources at their expense. This could be a real problem in view of the nature of highly personalized nature of politics especially in many African countries and the tendency for the opposition to gain in strength in the major especially capital cities (Olowu, 2009). On the other hand participation in local governance is voluntary, for some reasons people may not be motivated to participate in the governance processes and thus the researcher views this as a gap that requires investigation especially in a town like Bindura.

In sum, within the discussions on mainstreaming participation, governance and citizenship, a redefinition of the concept of participation can be seen, such that it moves from only being concerned with beneficiaries or the excluded to a concern with broad forms of engagement by citizens in policy formulation and decision making in key areas which affect their lives. Perhaps the best place to see and understand these new interactions is at the local level, where the concerns of the grassroots or locality intersect most directly with those of governance and the state (Goventa and Valderrama, 1999)

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study used the mixed method approach that is both qualitative and quantitative. According to Fielding and Fielding (2006) the logic behind these two approaches is the same in that while quantitative research may be used to test theory, it can also be used to explore an area or generating hypothesis or a theory. On the other hand, qualitative research is presented as the most

appropriate approach for theory generation - it can be used for testing hypothesis and theories. The other advantage of using the approach is that simultaneous mixed method design may permit the transformation of the qualitative data to quantitative numerical data and incorporation into the quantitative data set.

The survey design was preferred for this study on the basis of its strengths and appropriateness to the nature of the study. The study required that original information needed be sought from mainly the intended beneficiaries, that is residents of Bindura who are most affected by service delivery in the town. In order to get reliable statistical results that could confidently be generalized, it was important to sample a fairly large number of respondents to make sure they were representative of the population. The other reason for selecting the survey was the fact that they are suitable for studying characteristics, opinions, attitudes and experiences of a population gives them relevance to the nature of the study. .

The study sample consisted of forty-five residents. The study adopted random sampling technique. The research used questionnaires as research instruments. Questionnaires were chosen because they allow the respondents to answer questions at their own convenient times, are relatively easy to analyse and reduce bias through uniform presentation of questions. Simple descriptive statistics were used to present data.

## RESULTS

### Reasons for no or little participation in local governance related meetings

**Table 1: Barriers faced by residents in local government participation in Bindura N=45**

	Barriers	Frequency	Percentage
1.	No meetings were held in my area	2	4.4%
2.	I was not invited	4	8.9%
3.	I was busy	8	17.8%
4.	The meeting times are not appropriate	7	16.7%
5.	Nothing tangible comes out of the meetings	12	26.7%
6.	I was excluded on political grounds	2	5.6%
7.	I just don't like attending these meetings	3	7.8%
8.	Other reasons: The meetings have a political agenda	3	7.8%
9.	Meetings are poorly organised	1	1.1%
10.	Meetings are not well publicised	1	1.1%
11.	Receiving invitations late	1	1.1%
12.	Racial discrimination	1	1.1%
	<b>Totals</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>100%</b>

The table shows that 26.7 per cent of the responses were of the opinion that nothing tangible was coming out of the meetings. 17.8 percent of the respondents indicated that they were busy and therefore could not participate in local governance. Another significant percentage (16.7%) felt that the time meetings were held was not appropriate. About 1% said the meetings were poorly organized, meetings were not well publicized, they received invitations late and that there was racial discrimination

**Table 2: Reasons for non-attendance of meetings  
N=45**

Clusters	Categories
1. Bad timing of meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work commitments (10)</li> <li>• Other commitments (5)</li> </ul>
2. Politicization of developmental meetings (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manipulation of the meeting agenda for political gains (8)</li> <li>• Fear of political victimization (2)</li> </ul>
3. No invitations (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I did not get the invitation (including late invitations) (7)</li> <li>• No meetings were held (2)</li> </ul>
4. Meetings are unworthy (useless) (11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing comes out of the meetings (7)</li> <li>• Meetings are poorly organised (3)</li> <li>• Poor leadership (1)</li> </ul>

Table 2 shows that 15 of the responses gave reasons related to bad timing of meetings. The majority of the reasons related to work commitments (10) and the five related to other commitments (that were not specified). The table also reveals that 10 responses were related to the reasons that the meetings were unworthy to attend. In support of this theme 8 responses indicated that nothing tangible comes out of the meetings while 2 responses stated that meetings were poorly organised. One of the respondents blamed it on poor leadership. The other reasons that came out of the responses centred on politicization of supposedly developmental meetings (10). Two categories coming out of the responses relate to manipulation of the meeting agenda for political gains (8) and fear of political victimization (2). Finally the table shows that some of the respondents did not get the invitations to the meetings (7). The responses under this theme can be broken down into two categories namely; those who did not receive the invitations (7) and those who claim that no meetings were held (2).

In analysing the data presented above it can be deduced that a significant number of responses (15) indicated that they could not attend the meetings because of commitments.



## DISCUSSION

The study findings established that there are several barriers to participation in local governance that the researcher generally clustered into 4 major categories. Although all categories are closely linked, the clusters in order of importance were: (1) bad timing of meetings; (2) meetings are unworthy; (3) politicization of developmental meetings; and (4) no invitations (exclusion).

Most of the respondents gave reasons related to bad timing of meetings. The majority of the reasons related to work commitments (10) and the rest related to other commitments (that were not specified). This suggests that the meetings were conducted during times when many people are either at work or engaging in other priority activities. Some of the responses revealed that, "...the meetings are usually held mid-week around 5 p.m. when most workers are either still at work or on their way home." This finding concurs with the findings established in a study in Birmingham City by Rai (2004:19) who says, "...daytime meetings were also seen to be problematic for those in employment. Travel arrangements ... location, distance and timing of some meetings made them inaccessible to those using public transport.

The study also revealed that 24 percent of the respondents stated that the meetings were unworthy to attend. In support of this theme majority responses indicated that nothing tangible comes out of the meetings and the other response stated that meetings are usually poorly organised and poor leadership. Several other studies came up with this finding, for instance, in a study on Local Governments in Uganda conducted by Kasozi-Mulindwa, it was established that;

*... the concerns of citizens were never captured in the development plan and subsequently were not budgeted for in the approved budget. It was also established that in WDLG, citizen participation is treated as a ritual and has never been taken seriously by either the technical or political leaders. (Kasozi –Mulindwa, 2013:131)*

The other responses indicated that the meetings made no difference as nothing tangible really comes out of the meetings. This implies that the people's experiences have shown that even if they attend the meetings no change is witnessed as revealed by some of the residents' anecdotes below:

- *From experience, no residents' suggestions were considered.*
- *Residents' resolutions are not always considered.*
- *The meetings were (a) meaningless, repetition of issues without progress.*

The study revealed that 22 per cent of respondents indicated that they did not attend the meetings as they considered them political. According to the researcher's knowledge of Bindura Town most counsellors are sponsored by political parties which would otherwise wish to maintain political power. In such cases the counsellors may want to take every opportunity to consolidate their power as well as of their political party and thus politicization of developmental meetings. It can

therefore be deduced that the majority of meetings were biased along political lines. The following anecdotes from respondents may help to clarify this point:

- *Fear of political victimization.*
- *These meetings were about how to win an election only.*
- *Most, if not all (meetings) were political, so I do not want to be involved in politics*

It is however possible that some respondents could label the meetings 'useless' on the basis of political affiliation. Perhaps it is also possible that when some respondents attend meetings convened by a representative not of their political party they may feel a general dislike for the councillor on the basis of political differences and thus view everything as political.

Another finding established indicated that a significant number of the respondents (20%) had not been invited to the meetings. It can be deduced from those who said "no meetings were held" that they did not get the invitations. This is because other residents in their wards attended the meetings. This may be a deliberate exclusion or simply because the invitation did not reach them due to various factors that include the mode of invitation. The reasons given for low attendance of meetings, mostly point to a restrictive environment for participation, and 'technical exclusion' on the basis of failure to respond positively to people's needs by the local authority. The researcher argues that failure to address priority needs results in apathy. The finding confirms Manor and Crook (1998:29-30) in Goventa and Valderrama (1999:7), in their case study in India which illustrate how control over participatory procedures affect the opportunity of citizens to participate state that:

*...councillors in most places abandoned Gram Sabha meetings after the first year or two. Some resorted to subterfuge holding unannounced meetings at times when most villagers were away at work or at the market, or staging Gram Sabha meetings in the Mandal office.*

It is however possible that people will always find reasons for failing to attend to civic duties, for instance one respondent said, "I am never available for meetings". This could imply that even in future when even time is available they will "never" be available for such meetings. (Rai, 2008:20) argues that not all hindrances to engagement stemmed from external factors. Personal circumstances, personal attributes, skills and competences also determine the extent to which citizens are able to participate.

The study findings also revealed that a significant majority of the respondents (84.44%) really felt that they were not involved enough in matters of local governance. Interviews with some of the respondents revealed that consultation should be continuous rather than occasional. This is confirmed by 33 respondents (73.33%) who feel that at least 3 consultations and at most seven or more meetings are ideal for effective and meaningful participation.

The findings of the study are clear evidence that residents want more engagement with the local authority.

The study established that a considerable number of residents (26,7%) were disheartened by the fact that no worthwhile outcomes were being realised from the consultation processes. This finding confirms an earlier finding (item 4.3.5) where 25.5 percent of the respondents shared that they did not attend meetings because nothing was coming from the consultation meetings. Almost a similar pattern can also be viewed on the statement that respondents failed to participate in meetings because of work related commitments (17.8%).

It would appear that there are clear linkages between the reasons for failing to attend consultation meetings and blockages to participation in local governance generally. Insignificant reasons stated by respondents such as “meetings are poorly organised” and “Meetings are not well publicised” may turn out to be key factors as revealed by the fact that 8.9 percent of the respondents indicated that they were not invited to meetings while 4.4% stated that no meetings were held in their area.

## **.RECOMMENDATIONS**

After considering the results of the study the following recommendations have been made so as to reduce the barriers faced by residents in participating in local government initiatives:

- Counsellors should be trained on ways of organizing meeting and soliciting for maximum participation from residents.
- Counselors involve residents in setting out ward structures that organize meetings to address concerns of residents
- There is need to actively involve residents in the organization of meetings that address development issues in their areas.

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