

RESEARCH and EVALUATION

Rise in resident associational life in response to service delivery decline by urban councils in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article links the decline of service delivery in urban councils in post-independence Zimbabwe to a rise in levels of associational life. Poorer urban residents cannot easily escape poor public sector service delivery by resorting to the private market. In response to declining service delivery by councils, ratepayers form residents' associations to do three main things. First, they confront councils and pressure them to restore delivery capability. Second, they produce those services that councils are unable or unwilling to provide. Third, they defend residents against the predatory actions of councils. However, the capacities of residents' associations in these three areas have yet to be established. Notably, limited formal opportunities exist for engagement between councils and residents' associations which restricts their effectiveness. This paper argues that, if supported, residents' associations can deepen local democracy while simultaneously facilitating the repair of councils' capabilities – thus meeting disparate community demands and organising members to contribute to council recovery.

Keywords: local authority; residents' association; service delivery; urban local government; Zimbabwe.

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Introduction

Although residents' associations (RAs) in Zimbabwe are a pre-independence and predominantly urban phenomenon, their visibility and numbers have grown dramatically since 1980, with a spike post 2000. The first RA, the Bulawayo Residents' Association (BURA), was established in the early 1950s. However, Zimbabwe's post-2000 socioeconomic crisis resulted in a significant decline in local authorities' capability to deliver essential services such as housing, water and sewer reticulation, refuse removal, street lighting, primary health, and basic education (Government of Zimbabwe 2010; Kamete 2009: 65; Musekiwa *et al* 2013) so residents (more so in urban and less in rural areas) responded to the failures of local governments by creating RAs and increasing the visibility of such associations (Kamete 2009: 63). The rise in the numbers, mandate, and geographical spread of RAs occurred within a context of political liberalisation that witnessed the growth of significant opposition to the previously unchallenged Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) (Kamete 2009).

This paper addresses two main dimensions of this phenomenon. First, what have been the main functions of RAs, and, second, are RAs appropriately structured and resourced to engage councils and other stakeholders in order to respond to failures of local authorities and to contribute to the reconstitution of local governments' service provision capabilities?

Local government in Zimbabwe gained constitutional recognition with the adoption of the new constitution in 2013. However, despite this recognition, the constitution still regards local governments as a tier of central government rather than an independent sphere of government (Musekiwa & Mandiyanike 2013). Local governments in Zimbabwe are mandated to provide public services, but often in collaboration with central government departments. Councils have two structures for service delivery: a policy-making component composed of elected councillors and an appointed executive. Historically, local governments in Zimbabwe received minimal fiscal transfers from central government and meet most of their expenditure from local revenue. However, the post-2000 economic and political challenges, and international isolation, reduced central government and local authority ability to leverage external finance at a time when the economy was weak and so local revenues also declined dramatically.

From 2000 to 2008, Zimbabwe experienced severe macro-economic challenges, with inflation reaching an all-time high of 230,000,000% per annum in July 2008 (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe 2011). Service delivery by local authorities declined correspondingly and in 2008-09 dirty drinking water caused a cholera epidemic that tragically coincided with a collapsed health delivery system, leading to '98,592 reported cases and 4,288 deaths' (Government of Zimbabwe 2010: 36).

The socio-economic crisis eventually subsided in 2009 following the creation of an inclusive government. However, the recovery in basic services has taken a long time, and local authorities still faced service delivery deficits in 2013 (Chatiza *et al* 2013).

Responses to a decline in service delivery can be ‘bottom-up in nature’ (Bryson *et al* 2013: 26). A rational reaction to a decline in trust in public sector service delivery is for ratepayers to opt out of the public sector and secure these services from the private sector where possible (Irvin & Stansbury 2004: 56). For example, post-colonial Zimbabwe has seen a shift to private sector provisioning in housing and primary health care, as local authorities failed to satisfy demand. Unfortunately, it has been nearly impossible for ratepayers to opt out of public sector water, sanitation and waste collection services. As a result, ratepayers may choose to voice their concerns about the poor service as a means of restoring acceptable service quality and quantity (Hirschman 1970; Burns *et al* 2013).

There are two main dimensions to the expression of voice. Firstly, citizens can vote out poorly performing councils during regular local government elections. In Zimbabwe, since 2000, many urban local authorities have fallen under the control of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T), as the electorate registered discontent with the service delivery model of ZANU-PF, which has controlled central government since independence. Although citizens elect representatives (councillors), they do not wholly delegate community organisation for engagement with councils to these representatives. The councillors also do not prioritise citizen participation in local government affairs. As a result, the accountability of councils has tended to be more upward than downward, with RAs being regarded as ‘noisemakers ... calling tyranny to account’ (Kamete 2009: 60).

Second, where citizens are dissatisfied with the electoral system as a means of protest, they can organise into associations to engage authorities directly or produce and deliver services that the local authorities are unable or unwilling to provide.

Zimbabwe’s RAs can be seen as an expression of this second dimension. Increasingly, their concerns become people-centred, ‘designed to best service the needs of the public by providing opportunities for meaningful participation’ (Schulz 2013: 35). Escobar (2013: 36) argues that ‘participatory democracy is undergoing processes of professionalisation and institutionalisation, most notably in Europe and the United States’, particularly where the law mandates public participation (Bryson *et al* 2013: 26). Citizens’ participation in various forms, including RAs, is sometimes seen to promote better decisions and ‘more efficiency benefits to the rest of society’ (Irvin & Stansbury 2004: 56).

Methodology

This paper derived data from a study of 12 settlements in Zimbabwe (Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru, Mutare, Masvingo, Gwanda, Chinhoyi, Bindura, Kariba, Rusape, Chegutu and Mutoko). The study used a participatory approach to investigate the operations of 16 RAs from August to November 2013. The units of analysis were organisations: councils, departments within councils, and RAs. Stakeholders validated the data in a half-day workshop attended by 46 delegates from councils and RAs, held in Harare on 8 November 2013.

The sample for this study is drawn from urban areas, where RAs have a longer tradition of both existence and visible operations. Table 1 shows the list of councils and RAs sampled for the study. The large sample (12 out of 32 urban councils) reduced biases that could arise from political affiliation, size and age of RAs.

Table 1: Sampled Councils and RAs

Name of Council	Number of RAs	Number of RAs Included in Sample
Harare	2	2
Bulawayo	2	2
Mutare	3	2
Gweru	3	3
Masvingo	1	1
Chinhoyi	0	Interviewed Ministers' Fraternity.
Kariba	1	1
Chegutu	2	1
Mutoko	1	1 + Zimbabwe United Residents' Association (ZURA) representatives based in Mutoko
Rusape	1	1
Bindura	2	1
Gwanda	1	1
Total (n=16)	19	16

Source: Survey data, October 2013

The specific data collection methods used included: a document review of RA reports and plans; interviews with 46 key informants (13 from councils, 9 from funding partners, and 24 from RAs); and focus group discussions with community members receiving services from RAs. Evidence-gathering also involved attending functions such as the Combined Harare Residents' Association (CHRA) workshop convened to explore the establishment of a service delivery charter with the City of Harare, and the Harare Residents' Trust (HRT) seminar on local government provisions in the 2013 national constitution.

Characteristics of RAs in Zimbabwe

Generally, RAs are established as pressure groups to ensure that councils improve service delivery and are accountable to ratepayers. Pre-1980, RAs championed a political agenda for black urban citizens at a

time most nationalist political parties were ‘banned’ organisations. For instance, the Gweru Residents’ Association (GRA) was the voice of ‘blacks’ in enhancing access to urban services, whilst Mutare Residents’ and Ratepayers’ Association (MRRA) focused on the service delivery challenges faced by residents in high-density (low-income) areas of Umtali (now Mutare).

The RAs that emerged after 2000 continued this focus on citizen participation and access to services. The need to improve citizen participation was also a reason for the formation of the CHRA. The Combined Mutare Residents’ and Ratepayers’ Association (CMRRA) was established specifically to address issues of access to clean water, street lights, and refuse collection in the Dangamvura, Hob House and Fern Valley low-income suburbs.

Two shared issues emerge from the experiences of the different RAs. One is loss of faith in the capacity of local governments to deliver services to residents. Therefore, instead of waiting for councillors to deal with service delivery issues, residents establish RAs to complement or replace the councillor-based system. As Mushamba *et al* (2003) argued, RAs are guided by the notion that councils have some capacity but are unwilling to deliver services and will only perform with some nudging and guidance from ratepayers. The second issue is that RAs are established around pressing and generally short-to-medium-term issues, locking their efforts into addressing operational rather than long-term strategic issues. This is despite the fact that the service delivery challenges Zimbabwe has experienced in the post-2000 era are generally systemic and require long-term solutions.

The formation of the sampled RAs began in the 1950s (MRRA) and the 1960s (GRA). The youngest RA sampled was established in 2012 and the formation of RAs is ongoing. The mandate and influence of RAs often extends beyond council boundaries. For example, the Masvingo United Residents’ and Ratepayers’ Association (MURRA) facilitated the formation of RAs at rural service centres such as Mupandawana and Nyika in Gutu and Bikita respectively, as well as at Chiredzi Town, with the support of *Gesellschaft fuer Internationale Zusammenarbeit*. Table 2 shows the formation periods of the sampled RAs.

Table 2: Dates of Formation of Sampled RAs

	1950-60	1985-90	1991-94	1995-00	2001-05	2006-10	2011-13
Number of RAs formed	2	1	2	2	2	5	2

Source: Survey data, October 2013

A significant proportion of the sampled RAs (5/16) were formed between 2006 and 2010 in response to the decline in quantity and quality of services following the country’s economic problems. Recognising RAs’ potency, all political parties promote (directly and indirectly) the establishment of associations aligned to their interests. The 2000-13 period also witnessed the growth and consolidation of multi-

partyism and political polarisation. The MDC-T increasingly gained political ground in urban local authorities whilst ZANU-PF retained influence over rural areas and central government, causing aspiring politicians to sponsor the formation of RAs as instruments for political mobilisation.

Zimbabwe's experiences with RAs show an elite slant in the early days, but later on a broadening of the spectrum of membership and structures for participation (Kamete 2009). During the first decade of independence in 1990, participation was mainly restricted to ratepayers (usually property owners) and rarely included tenants or others with limited claims to rateable property. The advent of universal suffrage in local government elections replaced 'ratepayer' with 'resident', thereby broadening participation. Universal suffrage in urban areas has however raised questions of how to balance the diverse interests and capabilities of stakeholders – from domestic servants and their employers to corporate organisations – in public consultation. Municipal managers can have inordinate power, as they set the agenda for discussion (Bryson *et al* 2013: 29). Bryson *et al* (2013: 29) note that 'increased diversity can be expected to lead to increased conflicts, at least initially'. The 'omnibus' nature of RA membership may not reconcile the interests of diverse stakeholders in cases where no critical poverty and class analysis underpins their activities. There is therefore a need to 'manage the power dynamics' (Bryson *et al* 2013: 29).

Multiple and overlapping identities of RAs

RAs can register as trusts, private voluntary organisations (PVOs) or both, whilst some are unregistered. Of the sampled 16 RAs, nine were registered trusts, two were PVOs and five were unregistered.

Interviews with RAs' leadership showed that there are no clear registration procedures, regulations or operational guidelines for RAs in Zimbabwe, as the law does not recognise RAs. As a result, most RAs are registering as trusts because the registration process is easier. However, the registration of RAs as trusts raises questions regarding their ownership, since this legal identity sits uneasily with their membership-based status. Generally, trustees own and control their trusts while in a membership model the general membership owns the organisation. Some RAs that are trusts, such as Bulawayo Progressive Residents' Association (BPRA), also define themselves as community-based organisations (CBOs) despite being founded by a group of residents concerned with service delivery.

Therefore, the registration of RAs as trusts creates strategic and ownership tensions with the principles of membership-based organisations. These tensions explain why (at least for MURRA, BPRA, HRT and CHRA) their governance structures have layers that include trustees – less regularly involved in governing the organisations – and boards of governors directly connected to the ward-based membership structures. Such multi-layered organisational structures provide for robust accountability but may also cause confusion to outsiders. For instance, the CHRA membership forced the organisation to adopt a

constitution, despite having registered as a trust. CHRA standing committees (information and publicity; environment and water; programme planning, monitoring and evaluation; and membership and welfare) are connected to CHRA's 30 ward committees and connect into a management board, a general council with an annual general meeting, and trustees in a policy-making hierarchy.

Most RAs are aligned to one of Zimbabwe's main political parties. Where there is more than one RA in a council area, all RAs invariably align to either ZANU-PF or MDC-T (directly or indirectly). Party affiliation (actual and ascribed) tends to divide communities along political party lines and reduce RA effectiveness. In the case of MURRA, a ZANU-PF-aligned founder had to publicly dissociate himself and his business from the RA to achieve broad-based and non-partisan participation. MDC-T councillors in Chinhoyi used the RA as a social mobilisation tool, and the RA was then abandoned when its promoters were successfully elected to the 2008-13 council. In Bindura, activists aligned to the two main political parties led the Bindura Residents' Association (BIRA) and the Residents' Association of Bindura (RABI) respectively. In Bulawayo and Harare, the three main post-independence RAs (CHRA, BPRA and HRT) align with the opposition MDC-T. As noted by Schulz (2013: 35), 'the motives behind the process and the people sponsoring it can influence the outcome of the reengagement regardless of the process design'.

RAs are civic associations whose mandates have traditionally revolved around lobbying and advocacy, but they are increasingly exploring ways to facilitate constructive engagement between local government leaders, other service providers and citizens to improve conditions of living (HRT 2010). RAs increasingly conceptualise their work within the poverty eradication discourse. At the same time, RAs in Harare and Bulawayo have led a shift from a city to a local government sector focus.

Apart from advocacy and taking specific actions on issues of concern, RAs mobilise citizens to participate in local governance. In the Zimbabwean context, RAs have also worked in alliance with other civil society organisations on national issues such as constitutional and human rights concerns, although retaining a focus on policies, laws and practices relevant to local government (CHRA 2007). RAs participate in and comment on municipal budgeting and processes, monitor and lobby local and central government on service delivery performance, and mobilise citizens to lobby local authorities to meet their obligations. RAs have invariably challenged council policies and actions, unsettling officials and councillors and creating tensions and confrontations in the process.

Thus, while the social construction of Zimbabwe's urban RAs is variable, they clearly have an important role in expanding and deepening local democracy, working alongside and at times in conflict with other social, economic, and political institutions. The roles they play include social mobilisation, advocacy and lobbying and direct service delivery.

Roles of RAs

Social mobilisation

In relation to the populations of individual councils the membership of RAs is notably low. This is either an indictment of RAs' mobilisation capacity, or reflective of low civic engagement – if not both. The low membership levels could indicate that RAs are composed of 'the "usual suspects", people who are easily recruited, vocal, and reasonably comfortable in public arenas' (Bryson *et al* 2013: 29). The vulnerable often find it 'difficult to engage because their main priorities were to provide for their families, not spend time in meetings' (Irvin & Stansbury 2004: 59). RA membership varies from as little as 500 for Gweru Residents' and Ratepayers' Association (GRRRA) to 20,000 for MRRA. Table 3 shows the membership numbers of some of the RAs in the survey.

Table 3: Membership of Sampled RAs in 2013

RA	CHRA	HRT	KIARRA	MURRA	GRRRA	CMRRA	BURA	BPRA	MRRA
Members	10,000	2,505	4,000	1,150	500	6,700	2,000	8,000	20,000

Source: Survey data, October 2013.

Note: KIARRA (Kariba Incorporated Areas' Residents' Associations).

Of the sampled 16 RAs, nearly half did not have membership lists, while those that did lacked up-to-date databases and none had disaggregated membership data by gender and/or age. The outdated databases and the non-payment of membership fees demonstrate that RAs have a relatively lax system of administering membership. The study established that only two RAs (HRT and BPRA) had more than 50% of members paid up. At MURRA 43.5% of the membership was paid up. Besides low numbers of paid-up members, there also emerged competing interpretations of the purpose of membership fees at MURRA. Some members regarded membership fees as 'card/once off joining fees', or payment for 'T' shirts while others viewed them as subscriptions. Those who regarded them as payment for 'T' shirts resisted updating their membership without receiving the 'T' shirts. Overall, 50% of the RAs – MRRA, GRRRA, CMRRA, Gweru United Residents' Association (GRA), GURA, Mutoko Residents' Association (MRA), Bulawayo Residents' Association (BRA) and Chegutu Residents' Trust (CRT) – do not administer joining and subscription fees. The reason given was the high incidence of poverty among the membership, and because of prevailing economic constraints. The remaining RAs administer joining and subscription fees as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Joining and Subscription Fees per RA

RA	Joining fee(USD)	Annual subscription (USD)
CHRA	1	1
MURRA	1	1
HRT	1	20 per year from ward structures
BPRA	-	0.20
KIARRA	1 (ordinary members)	1 (ordinary members)
	2 (executive members)	2 (executive members)
BURA	1 (per household)	60 from affiliated suburbs (eg Phelandaba, Mabuthweni, Iminyela)

Source: Survey data, October 2013

None of the RAs rely on membership fees for revenue. The membership fees are low and paid infrequently, such that they are an unreliable financial resource for RA operations. All sampled RAs lacked funding; either completely, or had inadequate or inconsistent income. Only a few CHRA affiliates such as Borrowdale Residents' Association (in a non-poor neighbourhood) are self-sustaining.

Wild and Foresti (2013: 4) noted that external support could help address the problem of 'governance constraints to service delivery', and this study found that some RAs have donor-funding, although this is often inconsistent. The small grant sizes and unpredictability of disbursements affected the programmes and organisational viability of RAs. RAs also receive in-kind support from the private sector and councils for specific activities such as clean-up campaigns. Private companies that had collaborated with RAs include Lafarge Cement, Econet Wireless, Delta Corporation and other smaller businesses. As a result of limited funding, most RAs implement their activities through the voluntary input of members – particularly smaller and newer RAs.

RAs employ a range of social mobilisation strategies – including public awareness meetings, clean-up campaigns, workshops and informal meetings – to encourage participation and address specific problems. Some RAs directly engage communities and mobilise their members for meetings or gatherings using loudhailers. These meetings, together with policy dialogue sessions and conferences, bring together residents and service providers. RA conventions are attended by thousands of residents, where delegates discuss and seek solutions to specific challenges they face. RA conventions also invite councillors, council staff and representatives of other service delivery institutions to listen and respond to these challenges, and to set up structures for ongoing engagement. For instance, BPRA successfully lobbied for a 'Preparedness Committee' and mechanisms to minimise crises and hazards in Bulawayo, and for the council to address residents' vulnerability to disasters.

Women have particularly benefitted from the RAs' social mobilisation, as was the case for example in MURRA. Through the civic education and clean-up campaigns conducted by MURRA, women

influenced the management of public spaces, particularly in Ward 8 (part of the city centre) where they influenced the location of a commuter omnibus station in proximity to their vending sites. MURRA also influenced the prioritisation of the Masvingo Polytechnic traffic circle (roundabout) to reduce fatalities.

RA activities also support personal development of members. For instance, a MURRA trustee who is also an active member of the housing cooperatives' movement in Masvingo became a renowned civic activist through working with MURRA. Nationwide, some RA members (particularly from CHRA and HRT) competed to be councillors and those that succeeded credited RA-provided trainings and exposure. However, most RA policy guidelines forbid members from simultaneously holding political party and RA positions, suggesting that RAs do not formally mobilise members for political parties.

Where no RAs exist or are weak, the business community and religious leaders mobilise residents to engage councils. For example, the Ministers' Fraternity assumed this role in Chinhoyi where no active RAs existed.

Direct service delivery

A number of RAs are increasingly providing services in areas. In Bulawayo, BURA assisted with pauper burials – conducting 80 such burials in 2008. When Mpilo Hospital encountered economic challenges in 2008, BURA mobilised funding for the repair of the hospital mortuary and laundry facilities. BURA convened an 'all stakeholders meeting' with churches, funeral parlours, the business community, relevant government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the media among others. The dialogue resulted in a project (the 'Restoration of Mpilo') and, among several responses, a local hotel (Holiday Inn) adopted Ward B6 for renovation. Besides the support to Mpilo, BURA spearheaded an active HIV/AIDS programme in Bulawayo through 'home-based care' programmes.

In Harare, HRT's Gender Desk oversees a Funeral Fund where members pay a US\$2 joining fee and a monthly subscription of US \$2. Deceased adult members and minors were entitled to US\$500 and US\$200 cash benefits respectively for funeral expenses from the Fund. In the absence of a national social protection programme, the members of HRT interviewed in Mabvuku (a low-income suburb in Harare) were highly appreciative of the Fund. In Mutare, CMRRA mobilised communities for a reforestation and gully reclamation initiative in Dangamvura suburb. The Dangamvura Chapter sourced tree seedlings from local plantations and planted them in open spaces in the suburb. In Gweru, GRRA secured pothole-filling material from a private company in the neighbouring city of Bulawayo. Following protracted discussions with the council over its mandate to repair roads, GRRA and the council eventually agreed on a joint pothole-filling campaign around the city.

The manner in which the Harare City Slum Upgrading Project successfully worked with the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation and Dialogue on Shelter demonstrates how citizens can be engaged on urban planning issues traditionally considered too technical for ordinary residents. The Zimbabwe National Association of Housing Cooperatives (ZINAHCO) also worked with municipal housing directors to develop and document engagement mechanisms – later adopted across the country, thus facilitating the operations of their cooperatives.

The ZINAHCO and Dialogue on Shelter examples show how community-based organisations (CBOs) are able to mobilise residents and engage councils around a specific service delivery issue (housing in this case) in ways that build collaboration between councils, residents (members) and CBO structures. These national organisations and the housing CBOs they support were able to combine advocacy, lobbying and innovative community-led delivery in a complex web of relations that improved national housing policy and practice.

The present study observed that RAs often do not set out to become involved in service delivery, but it happens by default. Even the most common clean-up campaigns are not necessarily systematic and routine enough to become regular services that RAs promote amongst their members. Instead they are occasional responses to high-magnitude service delivery deficits. CHRA's emerging solid waste recycling initiative in Highfield area (a low-income suburb in Harare) indicates the available yet unclaimed opportunities. Such a resource-constrained environment necessitates the effective engagement of RAs to restore service delivery to acceptable levels (Schulz 2013: 35).

Citizen representation

Citizen representation by RAs encompasses not only shadowing councillors, but also bringing issues to the attention of councils, other service providers and central government, and initiating litigation on behalf of members. This function involves articulating and defending citizen rights coupled with lobbying and advocacy for specific responses by local governments.

Council–resident contact is weak, and the representative role of the councillor is stressed not only by political polarisation but also because the low calibre of councillors can be an issue. As such, for a sizeable number of residents RAs are an important conduit for raising grievances with service providers (councils included). The small numbers of residents affiliated to RAs and raising concerns through them seems to suggest that people may be suffering in silence or using other avenues not mediated by RAs. In most instances RAs approach service providers first, before central government and law courts, and only resort to peaceful protest and use of the media when they perceive that service providers are unresponsive.

Lack of council responsiveness often forces RAs to take cases to courts of law for determination. A case in point is that of Bindura Residents' Association (BIRA). In 2007, Bindura Town Council proposed selling council houses to sitting tenants under an empowerment framework. Upon checking the status of the houses, the RA established that the sitting tenants had already paid for the houses in full, suggesting that the council intended the 3,000 homeowners to pay twice for the houses. BIRA tackled the council on the issue, but the council proceeded to advertise the proposed sale of the houses. BIRA then engaged Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) who successfully lodged a court application and interdicted the sale. Not only did BIRA succeed in blocking the sale, but it also made follow-up court applications against the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) and the council in the same year, as ZESA and the council had disconnected services to residents. The courts ordered reinstatement of these services as the disconnections were ruled to be unlawful. The litigation strategy against service providers has therefore proved effective for residents in Bindura Town.

Over the years, CHRA has been involved in protecting households threatened with eviction from municipal social housing units. In 2006, CHRA handled at least five cases in July alone. The cases generally arose from inadequate lease administration with the council often violating its own policy. CHRA strategies included seeking court interdicts on behalf of complainants with the support of ZLHR. In all the July 2006 cases, CHRA successfully proved the council wrong. In 2007, CHRA also offered legal representation to 17 rates boycotters from Wards 7 and 22, arguing that city services were non-existent and that the commission running the city was illegal (CHRA 2007). At the time of the study, CHRA was liaising with other civil society organisations to devise responses to a prospective 'Operation Murambatsvina II' (which sought to demolish illegal structures in urban and peri-urban areas along the lines of the 2005 Operation Murambatsvina (*Operation Restore Order*)). In February 2012, HRT also intervened to save the moveable property of 16 out of 17 households in Mabvuku which had been confiscated by Harare City in lieu of outstanding debts ranging between US\$600 to US\$2,000. In Mutare, the study found that when ZLHR and MRRA defended cases of disconnection of water and repossession of housing plots, the council backed down, ending the cases.

BPRA successfully blocked the appointment of three special interest councillors to Bulawayo City Council by the ministry responsible for local government. The association obtained High Court orders in February and March 2013 barring the appointment of special interest councillors, after successfully arguing that the minister failed to consult Bulawayo residents prior to the appointments. Additionally, BPRA argued that the appointments came at a time when the relevant council term was nearing its end.

In 2005, when there was a directive by central government for councils to hand over water management to the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA), RAs across the country collectively sought the reversal of that Cabinet decision (Kamete 2009: 68; CHRA 2007). BURA and BPRA, with tacit support from Bulawayo City Council, successfully resisted the directive – resulting in Bulawayo being the only city to retain the water function.

The study also found cases where RAs supported councils to ensure they could continue to function. In Masvingo, city council employees won a labour dispute and subsequently confiscated council property. Despite appeals by the council, the property remained under threat of disposal by auction to settle council debts. MURRA became an unlikely ally of the council as it mobilised residents to block the auction, citing its negative implications for service delivery. MURRA used its forums to register its voice regarding the fate of the public assets. Similarly, in Rusape, council employees successfully sued the council for non-payment of salaries, leading to the sequestration of council vehicles including emergency ambulances. The RA, with the assistance of the local member of parliament and employees' lawyers, engaged the council in a tripartite dialogue resulting in an agreement on payment terms and the release of the vehicles. These cases illustrate an emerging trend where residents align with local authorities to take action to protect council property that they increasingly view (and appropriately so) as their own.

The effective engagement of RAs beyond a 'tick-box ritual' can be a disruptive intervention, affecting established working cultures and relationships and ultimately altering the cultures of organisations involved (Escobar 2013: 36). RAs occupy contested spaces in local governance, and are drivers of transition from a natural state that limits access to organisations to an open access order that does not limit access to organisations; furthermore, 'the ability to form organisations that the larger society supports is open to everyone who meets a set of minimal and impersonal criteria' (North *et al* 2009: 2).

As civic society organisations, RAs operate within individual council areas, but also between central government and councils when they take up broader service delivery issues. However, their relations both with other civil society organisations or intermediate organisations, and with councils, are inadequately developed. RAs occupy a space between councils and residents and within communities. Their role as intermediary between council and community arises when individual residents approach an RA with an issue on which they require representation to the council. In their work with communities, RAs support communities and individual households in approaching councils directly. If understood as 'located' between councils and residents, RAs' then deepen that interaction in much the same way councillors do. This 'location' causes anxieties amongst councillors, other party political actors and council staff, who argue that RAs compete with or displace councillors. Council officials, partly to protect their employers

but also to protect council-led policy-making, also tend to resent RAs' representative role. Yet, as a resident representation mechanism, RAs embody the expression of freedoms provided in the national constitution (Articles 58-61).

The UN-Habitat's 2013 programme to strengthen citizen participation in urban local governance in Zimbabwe (implemented in Bulawayo, Gweru, Kadoma, Kwekwe and Masvingo) focused on conflict transformation to improve relations between councillors and council officials as well as between residents and council structures. The programme, *inter alia*, involved residents in council strategic planning sessions, exchange programmes, and conflict resolution training. Involving residents (through RAs) improved resolution of some of the staff-councillor conflicts and reduced resistance to change (by councillors and staff). This suggests citizen participation has the potential to strengthen local governments. As such, citizen participation does not necessarily have to be indirect through elected officials; it can also be direct. However, the UN-Habitat project observed that not all RAs consistently engage councils. Often, they lack organisational skills and decisional literacy (financial, technical, and political).

Holding authorities accountable

RAs hold local authorities accountable to the public as they expose performance inadequacy in service delivery. The sampled RAs indicated that councils were generally unwilling to engage and unresponsive to complaints regarding service delivery. During the validation workshop, RA leaders from Bindura and Goromonzi suggested that their experiences showed that councils dislike RAs. Some RAs at the workshop shared this view, but representatives of councils as well as other RAs disagreed. Councils (particularly officials) accused RAs of poor understanding of how the local government system works, circumventing councillors and often being 'unprofessional' in their conduct. Officials also argued that the poor quality of services reflected the low-income status of residents and the state of the national economy. Council officials further accused RAs of misinforming residents, generally being reactive in their operations and not focusing on improving residents' capacities. Therefore, the evidence from the engagement process was conflicting and effective participation will necessitate resolving those contradictions. Furthermore, the processes failed to build trust; an element that Schulz (2013: 35) argues is critical for successful engagement. Without professionalisation, council staff often regard the engagement of RAs as an additional workload (Escobar 2013: 36) that distracts them from their core mandate of delivering services.

At council level, municipal managers have been selective in their engagement with RAs. Central government has neither properly facilitated nor regulated the work of RAs in particular, and civil society

organisations working on local governance issues generally, in terms of engagement with councils and the ministry responsible for local government. Citizen engagement or public participation mechanisms have therefore been weak in Zimbabwe. Ely and Jacob (2013: 38) also note that municipal officials can 'work around' the constraints, ignore them after decisions have been made or 'take actions to lock in policy outcomes before voters have time to (dis)approve the initiative'.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that when lawyers engaged by RAs approach service providers the cases are often resolved by the service providers backing off from their proposed actions. Similarly, when RAs institute peaceful protests or media exposure, service providers respond by seeking dialogue and often complaining that the RAs should not have gone ahead without first checking with them. As noted by Kamete (2007: 340), the 'interactive space is tainted with bad faith'. This behaviour by service providers tends to reinforce the perception that they are insincere and thrive on passive residents who comply with (at times) very unreasonable demands. For instance, in September and October 2013 HRT informally gathered information on a billing scandal in the City of Harare, following unsuccessful requests for relevant information. Armed with the information, HRT unsuccessfully sought to meet relevant city officials for a discussion. However, when HRT issued press statements subsequently published by local newspapers (*The NewsDay* 3 September 2013; *The Standard* 20 October 2013; *The Sunday Mail* 20 October 2013) the affected city officials who had previously refused HRT an audience complained that the organisation was behaving in a manner unhelpful for cordial relations.

This approach of using the media to hold local authorities to account could become significant given the high penetration levels of social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp and mobile telephony, and internet connectivity generally. As noted by Escobar (2013: 37), 'public participation processes like any political process, are messy' and hence the 'backstage' activities of 'negotiating, nudging, nagging, cajoling, pressing, persuading, reframing, aligning, trapping, enticing, enthusing, concealing, disclosing, unleashing and connecting' are critical to attainment of positive outcomes. But the engagement process in Zimbabwe has lacked facilitators to 'help manage conflict, listen to different points of view' (Bryson *et al* 2013: 28).

However, RAs encounter many challenges in holding local authorities accountable as there is no service level benchmarking, or standards and charters agreed between residents and local authorities. CHRA has however proposed such a service charter with Harare City.

Conclusions

The decline in service delivery in Zimbabwe has had an impact on public engagement and the development of associational life. The decline has been systemic to the extent that it requires systematic responses from citizens, but to strengthen their voice, citizens have sought to act collectively and in the process have institutionalised public participation. However, many local authorities have not had the capacity to respond effectively to organised citizens' input, and responses from local authorities have been generally poor or outright hostile.

The survey in this research suggests that RAs have succeeded in representing and defending their constituencies against council actions. However, RAs have achieved limited success in holding local authorities accountable, due to inadequate revenues and insufficiently developed management structures. As argued by Schulz (2013: 35) the engagement of RAs is dependent on the nature of the challenge, the participants and the political environment and hence the outcome can vary from council to council and over time, and on an issue-by-issue basis within a particular council.

Nevertheless, in view of the growing institutionalisation of citizens' input processes, there is a need to professionalise the process with support for both RAs and local authorities. The appointment of public participation officials to engage RAs would be useful. Local authorities could also allocate a portion of their budget to RAs so that they avoid the risk of capture by sponsors, in addition to guaranteeing some minimal amount of resources.

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