

EFFECTIVENESS OF DECENTRALISED VILLAGE INSTITUTIONS IN LEADING RURAL
DEVELOPMENT IN CHIMANIMANI DISTRICT OF ZIMBABWE

By

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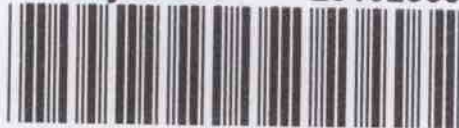
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ABSTRACT

In this case study, grassroots community perceived characteristics of effective and strong village development institutions in Chimanimani District of eastern Zimbabwe were investigated. The aim of the study was to develop an intervention framework for improving the effectiveness of decentralised local institutions such as Village Assemblies, Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) and traditional governance structures in championing rural development. This entailed building a better understanding of the underlying causes of the observed poor performance of these institutions in villages within Mhakwe and Chikwakwa wards. A semi-structured guide was used to conduct 40 face to face interviews and facilitate 11 focus group discussions in which 60 respondents participated.

Thematic content analysis of qualitative data was carried out using the NVivo software version 8.0. With regard to quantitative data, cross tabulations and Chi-Square tests were carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 for Windows. The multiple constituency model framework was used to assess the perceptions on effectiveness of the grassroots community institutions.

The results show that community members defined development in terms of economic and social parameters. There were no statistically significant differences in perceived development among the social groups ($P > 0.05$). Nor were there significant differences among the social groups with respect to their perceptions on effectiveness of VIDCOs ($P > 0.05$). Dearth of civic awareness on institutional arrangements for local government especially among women, was observed. Apart from ward level institutions that spearhead development, more than 70% of the participants in focus group discussions did not know any others. All interest groups regarded the ability to put in place and implement long-term programmes, transparent management and administration, and demonstration of people-centred leadership qualities or skills as the key attributes of an effective VIDCO. No significant inter-social group differences in the perceived key attributes ($P > 0.05$) were observed.

Taking into account the leading roles that the village institutions played in achieving political independence, it is questionable why the same institutions continued to fail to facilitate people-centred economic and social development. It was concluded that there were major bottlenecks that made it impossible for the intended decentralisation to effectively take root. The apparent neglect of the village as a nucleus of development was found to be deliberate and purposeful.

Thus, the commitment of those in power to 'hand over the baton stick of leading development' was questionable. Inadequate capacity of local elected institutions should not be embraced as an excuse for continuously side-lining them. Although traditional leaders were important, their ability, commitment and relevance in leading democratic development institutions such as VIDCOs was also questionable. An approach that does not do away with them and also not put them at the centre seemed to be the most appropriate way forward. In this regard, an improvement framework that recognises the centrality of capacity as a non-negotiable on-going process was proposed. The proposed improvement framework is anchored on building consensus; mass civic conscientisation; institutional restructuring; resourcing; and effective development facilitation mechanisms

The study recommends the need for further research on how traditional and democratically elected institutions should co-exist in driving the development agenda. The nature, form and roles of party politics in village democracy as a unifying or divisive indulgence should be further interrogated using appropriate techniques that deepen social inclusion and genuine participation.

Key words: Decentralised village institutions, effectiveness, improvement framework, leadership and rural development