

# Social Change: Urban Governance and Urbanization in Zimbabwe

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**Abstract** Urbanization is an essential determinant of social change. For social change to take place, the process of urbanization requires extensive management (through urban governance). This paper outlines the context of Zimbabwe's urban governance system by focusing on the historical and recent trends in urban governance and urbanization. In particular, our emphasis is placed on how pre- and post-colonial governments advanced social change through urban governance. In both pre- and post-independence Zimbabwe, local government is a political reality that ruling regimes manipulates, associates with and advance political interests. Politics continue to shape and destabilize a functioning, independent, and autonomous form of urban governance in Zimbabwe. Urban governance remains under incessant threat from central government. Central-local government contestations are leading to poor service delivery; a development that is affecting social change. The article argues that the politics, governance, and institutional behaviors in urban centers of Zimbabwe deteriorated severely calling for a restructuring of urban governance.

**Keywords** Urbanization · Social change · Urban politics · Center-local relations · Urban governance · Zimbabwe

## Introduction

In Africa south of the Sahara, the growth and emergence of local governance was inextricably linked to colonialism. African cities were governed and controlled

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remotely by colonial municipal administrations from capital cities in the Global North, thus “playing a critical role in the process of colonial political domination and in the extraction of profit by colonial business enterprise” (Harrel-Bond et al. 1978: 309). Urban governance was a tool for supporting the status quo and repressing revolutionary movements. In modern times, little emphasis has been placed on changing urban planning, the main tool urban governance employs in promoting social change. In fact, urban planning continues to perpetuate social and economic segregation in African cities (Jenkins et al. 2007; Njoh 2007; Myers 2003, 2011; UN-Habitat 2009a).

Sub-Saharan African cities require an independent form of governance and an economic order to facilitate the transition from demographic to socio-economic growth. The rate of urbanization has not been tallying with urban socio-economic development. The *State of African Cities Report* (UN-Habitat 2010) advances that “... as the urbanization of African poverty makes further progress, the prospects of a dignified and productive life continues to elude the poorest among Africans.” Rapid urbanization in the developing world is seriously outstripping the capacities of cities to adequately provide services to citizens (Cohen 2006). Slum settlements, problems of congestion, and urban sprawl make urban governance “too demanding” in providing basic infrastructure and delivery of essential services.

In the Zimbabwean context and in this paper, we define social change as a systematic improvement in the delivery of key human development services such as water and sanitation, health, education, transport, and housing (Oesterdiekhoff 2014; Eisenstadt 1973; Polanyi 2001; Tilly 1988, 2004; Vago 1999). These services have traditionally been limited in terms of delivery to Africans during British rule in Zimbabwe. For that reason, the aim of post-colonial local government was to expand the provision of human development services. In this regard, the main vehicle for development at local level became local authorities. Local authorities became centers of managing urbanization and redressing colonial disparities. In this paper, we present decentralization as a precondition for the development of inclusive urban governance and social change. Decentralization, we argue, is one of the main strategies used by independent Zimbabwe to promote the role of local authorities in facilitating social change.

Using decentralization as key determinant of how urban governance functions in promoting social change, this article analyzes the dynamics of Zimbabwe’s urban governance system and resultant service delivery. First, the article presents urban governance as a framework of analysis through flagging out the essence of decentralization in promoting social change. Further, the paper outlines Zimbabwe’s pre-independence local government context by emphasizing on major developments. Building on the historical and colonial perspectives, we explain the attempts by the Government of Zimbabwe to promote social change through urban governance. In particular, we focus on the decentralization period (1980–1990), urban governance reforms (1990–2000), change and contestation period (2000–2008), and deepening contestation and confusion (2008–2012). Next, our analysis turns to presenting the state of service delivery and urbanization levels before explaining service delivery failure. The paper concludes by pointing to the autonomy of urban governance as the key explanatory factor in Zimbabwe’s urban governance crisis.

## Urban Governance and African Cities

The United Nations agency responsible for human settlements, UN-Habitat (2002: 14); defines urban governance as:

The sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, plan and manage the common affairs of the city. It is a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and cooperative action can be taken.

The UN-Habitat definition places emphasis on actors (state and non-state actors), with urban governance being an arena of conflict and collaboration. In studying African cities, urban governance has been defined as “encompassing the multiple *sites* where practices of governance are exercised and contested by a variety of *actors*, various layers of *relations* and a broad range of practices of governance that may involve various *modes of power*, as well as different *scales*” (Lindell 2008: 1880 emphasis original). Such a definition allows one to understand the contestations, relations of power, and associated struggles among actors in the urban domain. In practice, urban governance includes urban management and deeply politicized struggles over distribution of resources and quality of places (UN-Habitat 2009b: 74). In the African context, there are unresolved conflicts among three major stakeholders namely central government, local authorities, and civil society (UN-Habitat 2010). Providing services to an ever expanding urban population is the primary responsibility of urban governments. In this case, urban governance concerns itself with the production and delivery of services. Service provision is when the organization or institution involved is responsible for the quality and quantity of the service and ensures its financing and execution (Davey 1993). The demand for service delivery due to rapidly increasing urbanization makes urban governance thus an important sphere of state governance.

It has to be emphasized that the relationship between state and urban governance is defined by power and authority. Therefore, urban governance is essentially about power relations within and between political actors and institutions leading to power struggles (Harpham and Boateng 1997). In this regard, the reality in African cities is that urban governance has been reduced to political struggles over the control of urban affairs. In a way, two main actors have been dominant in urban governance namely ruling and opposition political parties. It is therefore helpful to understand urban governance in terms of the different dimensions which it is experienced (episodes, governance processes, and governance cultures) (Healey 2004: 18). We explore how urban governance manifests in Zimbabwe from the colonial to the post-independence era in which decentralization is a vital component of inclusive governance. It is for this reason, that we explain the manifestations of decentralization in cities and Zimbabwe in particular.

Decentralization is a vital element to the development of inclusive urban governance and social change. As such, we explain decentralization in African cities. The relationship between local and central government is defined by two constructs which are centralization and decentralization. Centralization sees urban governance as local administration that is an extension and integral part of a sovereign state. This implies that the state has “an obligation to supervise local government to ensure that powers delegated to the subnational units are not overstepped” (Ismail et al. 1997: 14). The

decentralist approach sees urban governance as enshrined in constitutional arrangements thereby enjoying autonomy.

The currency of decentralization in the developing world is unparalleled with 80 % of all developing and transition countries undertaking some form of decentralization in the past two decades (Crawford and Hartmann 2008: 7). African states have a long history of being centralized states in which centralized planning and administration was or is prevalent. With pressure from international development agencies and civil society organizations, most countries have implemented decentralization reforms at one stage. Across the continent, the extent and magnitude of decentralization differs.

A consensus of the need to “roll back the state to the frontiers of development planning;” in simpler terms reducing the role of the state in public service provision and development processes provided the impetus for decentralization. The World Bank (1989) argues that decentralization concerns the division of roles and responsibilities between central authority, local government, and local communities with a view to reduce the number of tasks performed by central government and to decentralize the provision of public services. The debate about decentralization, brings to the fore the centrality of local governments in any state. The thrust of decentralization lies in the perception that local government is more responsive to local needs and is inclusive of the majority poor (Crawford and Hartmann 2008).

Forms of decentralization include devolution, deconcentration, privatization, and fiscal. In Africa, south of the Sahara, the emphasis on decentralization has shifted from deconcentration to devolution and to some extent privatization. This is exemplified by the writing of new constitutions in Kenya and Zimbabwe which emphasized on devolution of power and functions. In addition, both countries were reacting to a “too much centralized state” under seemingly authoritarian regimes. Political decentralization is the creation of local government through “devolution of powers to represent local councils, each with separate legal existence” (Tardoff 1994). Thus devolution emphasizes on “empowering local level authorities, independent of government, with decision-making responsibilities and resources” (Sundar 2001: 2008).

The World Bank in its 1999/2000 *World Development Report* calls for a rethinking of the government in which decentralization allows local people “greater self-determination and influence in the decisions of their government” (World Bank 1999: 107). It is important at this point to highlight the importance of proper planning and full implementation of decentralization programs so as to go beyond the political rhetoric. More often, decentralization programs are outlined as political gimmick in order to appease certain political constituencies but without full implementation. Decentralization reforms must spell out the sharing of roles, responsibilities and finances between central and local governments. This should be enshrined in the constitution and subsidiary legislation.

Decentralization promotes inclusive governance in a number of ways (Faguet 2014). First is that it allows diverse local actors to participate and decide on local affairs. Second is that, it promotes participatory governance in which local communities not only participate but also influence decision-making. Third is that, through decentralization, decisions in urban affairs are more likely to address local development conditions. Thus, it can be argued that it is through decentralization that governance decisions in the urban domain can be context specific addressing specific needs of specific communities. In order to promote social change through service delivery,

Government of Zimbabwe adopted decentralization as a fundamental reform principle in local government. Since independence in 1980, the objectives and nature of the government's decentralization thrust has changed over time (Wekwete and de Valk 1990; Gasper 1997; Makumbe 1998; Chakaipa 2001; Conyers 2003). The changes over time are explained in detail in succeeding sections. Suffice to say, here, we provide some views from literature on Zimbabwe's decentralization program. Emerging issues on Zimbabwe's decentralization program include the importance of capacity building and capacity of local institutions, political environment and viewing the process as a "learning process" (Conyers 2003).

Marumahoko (2011: 37) argues that in the Zimbabwean case, "efforts to capacitate urban councils through decentralization are futile if urban local government lacks the necessary financial means to fulfill its responsibilities." At the center of this argument is that decentralization of finances and resources is critical for local government to perform its functions. It goes without saying that decentralization of functions only results in unfunded mandates. The period under analysis in this paper was marked by decentralization of functions and not finances to local authorities. This presented challenges to the delivery of services. First, local authorities relied on central government grants (which were no longer provided) making the former subservient to the latter. In a harsh macroeconomic environment, central government prioritized its functions neglecting local authorities. Thus, the Government of Zimbabwe has been accused of using decentralization "as a means of reducing the costs of providing public service" (Ministry of Local Government and Public Housing 1999: 7). This in a way overburdened local authorities as they were expected to deliver public services without commensurate resources.

After making a review of decentralization and recentralization in Africa, Wunsh (2001: 227) argued that central government must relinquish authority to local government in areas such as areas planning and capital investment, budgeting and fiscal management, personnel systems and management, and finance and revenue. These areas have been contentious in Zimbabwe's urban governance as central government relentlessly interfered in urban planning and management systems of local authorities (Muchadenyika 2014a). In Zimbabwe, central government has firm control over human resources, planning, budgeting, and revenue management in local authorities.

In Zimbabwe, urban governance is an appendage of the central government. Center local relations are confrontational and contested due to divergences in local autonomy and central control. In this instance, local government becomes "a creature of statute subject to the vagaries and predilections of central political administrations" (Sullivan et al. 2004). The birth, growth, and demise of urban governance lie in the hands of central government. The creation, redefinition, and functional changes are detected by central government as it so desires (Kamete 2006a: 256). Power, resources (financial, human, and capital), and real jurisdiction lies in the central government and is transferred to urban authorities when central government so wishes.

Contradictions have been worse and tense in multi-party councils, especially when central government power dynamics were not representative at the local state. Kamete (2006a) argues that it is unimaginable for a party in government to lack a presence at local government. Absence of central government representation at local level makes political players at central government level feel losing political support and on the road to political exit. The fear emanates from the perception of a rival in creation (Keating

1995), and the “problem ceases to be simply about the functions of local government” (Kamete 2006a: 257), but political infighting and survival. Urban governance became a battlefield riddled with political struggles.

Kamete (2006a: 257) argues that “when city residents vote into council a political party other than the ruling party and central government appears to be harrying the opposition controlled council, residents may interpret this as an assault to their democratic choice....” On the contrary, the state justifies its action as a guarantor of the social contract thus ensuring delivery of services to citizens by its agencies. Control from central government “often create more problems than they solve, including delays, frustrations, additional costs and perverse behavior” (Devas and Delay 2006: 687). This resembles a prototype of the urban governance scenario in Zimbabwe after the ascendancy of opposition party the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in urban governance and the resultant central government interference. At the same time, service delivery deteriorated to record levels.

### **Pre-independence Local Government Context (1890–1980)**

Local government in Zimbabwe was largely determined by the racial system of land apportionment between blacks and whites (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1991). A two tier local government system existed divided along racial lines. The system was designed to maintain peace and order within the black population and to ensure continued black contribution to the settler economy. Overall there were urban, rural (in white or European areas), and African Councils for the black majority.

Through the 1923 “Responsible Government Constitution,” Native Councils were created for the first time in African areas. This marked the establishment of institutionalized rural local government. The Native Councils Act of 1937 created formal Native Councils composed of chiefs, headman, and local black nominees. There was however a time lag on the creation of Native Councils as Native Boards took effect in 1931. The purpose of Native Boards was to “meet the legitimate desire for the unlimited expression of native opinion” though in practice they suppressed black political association (Weinrich 1971: 14). The number of Native Councils kept on fluctuating from 23 in 1940, increasing to 58 by 1958 before dropping to 52 by 1965 (Chatiza 2010) and increasing to 98 by 1969 (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1991) and increasing again to 220 by 1979 (Jordan 1984). The role of Native Councils was limited to advising the government on African aspirations (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1991).

Afterwards, the 1957 African Councils Act broadened powers of African Councils to include making bye-laws, imposing rates, and exercising powers comparable to those of a town council. By 1979, there were 220 African Councils which were a creation of the 1957 African Councils Act (Jordan 1984). The purpose of the Act was to provide social services such as education, health, and social welfare as a way of ensuring citizen participation by creating an environment in which democratic values, social responsibility, collective self-help, and progressive leadership could emerge (Passmore 1972). There were 57 rural councils established after the 1966 Rural Councils Act (Jordan 1984). These Councils which started as Road Committees enjoyed similar autonomy as their urban counterparts. The only field administration which appeared in the Rural Councils was the Department of Conservation and

Extension (Conex) which provided conservation and extension services in the commercial farming areas in order to maximize agricultural production (Matumbike and Muchadenyika 2012). The 1966 Rural Councils Act was enacted and catered for commercial farmers and the formalization of existing road committees.

Upon independence, the 1980 District Councils Act replaced 220 “African Councils” with 55 District Councils, though fragmentation existed as Rural Councils were found in former “European areas.” The 1980 District Councils Act revitalized and democratized the system of local government (Helmsing et al. 1994). Members of the District Councils were elected based on one man one vote and also included were chiefs as ex-officio members of council (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1991).

For urban local government, the Salisbury Sanitary Board of 1891 instituted the commencement of urban local government (Makumbe 1998). The Town Management Ordinance of 1894 established more sanitary boards in the main towns of Bulawayo, Mutare, and Gweru (Matumbike and Muchadenyika 2012). Later, the Municipal Ordinance of 1897 granted municipal status to Salisbury (Harare) and Bulawayo, with wholly elected councils (Chakaipa 2010). Only residents with properties were allowed to vote in municipal elections; a condition that segregated the majority of Africans.

The Municipal Act (1930) and Urban Councils Act (1973) provided the legal framework for urban local authorities. Town planning services were categorized according to race, with African townships having limited services as compared to European areas. In cities, African housing was tightly controlled and restricted to those formally employed. Rural-urban migration controls provided a convenient way of managing urban African population and matching it with the under provision of services in African areas.

Colonialism brought a new socio-economic and political fabric in the form of densification of the built environment in what became known as towns and cities. Pre-independence urban development shaped the form, design and structure of present day Zimbabwean cities. The necessity of managing the restless and revolutionary “African areas” resulted in the colonial government effecting most pre-independence changes (institutional and legislative) in rural as compared to urban areas. Upon independence from Britain in 1980, decentralization, democracy, and expanding service provision in urban areas came to the fore.

## **Urbanization and Urban Governance in Post-Independent Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe inherited a dichotomous and tripartite local government framework comprised of urban councils, “white” rural councils and “black” rural local authorities fragmented along racial lines (Masundu-Nyamayaro 2008). The 1988 Rural District Councils Act eliminated fragmentation in rural local government through amalgamating “white” rural councils and “black” rural local authorities into rural district councils. At the national level, independent Zimbabwe inherited a highly centralized system of government, founded and built upon racial lines (Helmsing et al. 1991). After independence, the Government of Zimbabwe made local government changes through legislation, directives, and policy pronouncements. These changes were in pursuit of the twin objectives of socio-economic development and the reduction of colonial disparities.

Local government reforms of the 1980s were designed to achieve several development objectives such as rural, urban, and regional development. The main purpose of urban local governments is to manage urbanization and its related processes. Post-independence urbanization and urban governance can be analyzed in four distinct phases. These are the decentralization period (1980–1990), urban governance reforms (1990–2000), change and contestation period (2000–2008), and deepening contestation and confusion (2008–2012).

### **Decentralization Period (1980–1990)**

Post-1980, urban development pursued a one city concept aimed at deracializing cities. Despite this attempt, Wekwete (1994) argues that the income and physical fabric of the built environment show segregation tendencies. Initial attempts at local governance reforms were imbued in decentralization. Decentralization in Zimbabwe expended much rhetoric leading to a number of practical challenges as the Government of Zimbabwe showed more romanticism than realism. As Rondinelli and Nellis point out, most decentralization policies are undertaken for primarily political reasons, and how the policy works out in practice depends on similar political struggles (Conyers 1989). The Government of Zimbabwe and in particular the ruling party achieved political as compared to urban and development planning benefits in the decentralization program.

The 1984 and 1985 Prime Minister's Directive<sup>1</sup> outlined the new local government structures and introduced development committees at village, ward, district, provincial, and national levels with the aim of fostering bottom up planning. Roles of these committees included information supply, implementation, delegated and independent planning, and policy making and review (Gasper 1991). Development priorities were identified and formulated at village level, channeled through the ward, district, and provincial levels to the national level. The basic premise was that contents of the national development plan should be development priorities discussed and prioritized at the village and ward level.

In practice, created development planning agencies suffered time and budgetary constraints, lack of skilled personnel, and central government interference in local decision-making. Created development planning agencies became insignificant and fruitless. By the end of the first decade of decentralization, it was clear that the process had failed to yield anticipated results as Brand (1991) likened the process to “centrally created decentralization.” Central government was not committed to the letter and spirit of making local government a distinct sphere. Gasper (1991: 41) point out that:

Decentralization can never simply be instituted by a set of legal or administrative decrees. It required many measures of information dissemination, demonstration, incentives, training, discussion, mobilization, and ongoing informal coordination.

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<sup>1</sup> As enunciated in three government documents that is (a) ‘The Provincial Governors and Local Authorities in Zimbabwe: A Statement of Policy and directive by the Prime Minister’ released in 1984, (b) ‘The Provincial Councils and Administration Act, 1985’, (c) ‘Structure of Village Development Committees and Extension Services’ released in 1985.



The 1980 Urban Councils Act introduced universal adult suffrage by repealing the 1973 Urban Councils Act which was premised on colonial property franchise. Oppressive migration laws were repealed and massive rural-urban migration ensued. Urban population growth ballooned. The first decade did not yield expected reforms of fostering improved local governance necessitating post-1990 reforms aimed at strengthening urban governance.

### **Urban Governance Reforms (1990–2000)**

In the 1990s, the objective of the government's decentralization program shifted to promoting democracy and the focus of attention turned to elected local authorities (Conyers 2003). Local government plays a pivotal role in the promotion of local participation and local level democracy. It became necessary to democratize local governments in the post-1990 period. An important vehicle used in the democratization process is elections (Laakso 1999) which started in 1993 in rural district councils and 1995 in urban councils. The introduction of local government elections was a landmark development as citizens became active agents of deciding who runs the local level.

The introduction of a directly elected executive mayor in 1995 marked a major change in urban governance. The move was aimed at strengthening representational democracy as urban residents had the right to elect the political and administrative head of urban councils. However, the Zimbabwe Institute (2005: 17) argues that:

The Executive Mayor is a poor hybrid of the traditional British style Mayor and the American Strong Mayor.... Unlike the American strong Mayors who are executives with appointing and dismissing powers and veto powers, the Zimbabwe Executive Mayor is accountable to full council.

In real terms, the Executive Mayor gained no executive authority. Attempts by Executive Mayors to assume executive functions often led to clashes between the Mayor and Town Clerks. Several practical challenges ensued in cases where the mayor was not from the ruling party (Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front, Zanu-PF). Such mayors were castigated by central government as pursuing parallel policies. The Executive mayoral system resulted in a tug of war between Mayors and Town Clerks. Overlapping and duplication of roles and responsibilities were the main triggers of such conflict.

During the same period, the World Bank's Urban I and II which started in the 1980s continued in the 1990s. The project focused "upon improving urban services and strengthening city governance...[it] did make useful investments in sites and services, basic urban infrastructure and community health and education services in low income areas" (World Bank 2002). Post-2000 exposed the intensity of the outcome of decentralization as the opposition MDC-controlled urban councils. Central government reacted by drastically interfering in local government, in the process, recentralizing power and authority. Such government reactions defeated the purpose of decentralization.

### **Change and Contestation Period (2000–2008)**

Politics became a central destabilizing factor to post-2000 urban governance. The autonomy and functioning of urban government institutions became more contested

than in previous decades. Central government tried to wrest control of MDC-controlled local authorities putting into motion a “cat and mouse” relationship between central and local government (Muchadenyika 2015c). Olowu (2009: 117-18) summed the rapid deterioration of local governance due to political contestations as:

Zimbabwe represents the example of a country that once had very robust institutions of local governance especially in the urban centers but the powers and resources of these institutions have systematically degraded over time as a result of political developments at the national level. A 1994 study by this author (Oluwu, Dele) found the Zimbabwean city of Harare and Kariba to manifest all the indicators of a sound local governance system at par with similar capital cities in South Africa (Cape Town and Durban), India (Bombay) and Canada (Toronto). In fact, in some important respects, the two sample Zimbabwean cities were better managed than some cities in India (Delhi and Hydebrad) and Nigeria (Lagos and Kano). Within a decade, most of these elements of good governance had been eroded as a result of the power struggle at the national center, one of whose elements is what I now understand to be major constitutional amendment on municipal government to neutralize the growing power of the opposition to the ruling party especially in the cities of Bulawayo and Harare.

The rise and ascendancy of MDC in urban local government resulted in serious confrontations between state and local level. Zanu-PF had lost the control of most local authorities in elections and tried to regain lost urban governance institutions. The fight to control urban areas was sustained at the expense of urban service delivery. Ranger (2007) argues that, since 2000 the Zimbabwean state has radically intervened in urban local government. The sacking of opposition executive mayors<sup>2</sup> and their replacements with commissions loyal to Zanu-PF ensued. Ranger (2207: 161) contends that:

Elected executive mayors have been dismissed; whole municipal councils have been sacked; commissions appointed by the state have attempted to run cities. A whole series of new state authorities - governors for both Harare and Bulawayo; district administrators for the townships -have been inserted above and into the cities.

After the sacking of Harare mayor and the subsequent resignation of a number of councillors in protest, the situation became worse as of December 2004, when there were not enough elected councillors remained to form a quorum (Kamete 2009). In accordance with the Urban Councils Act, the local government minister appointed commissioners to run city affairs. The commission’s term must not exceed 6 months and it was scheduled to end in June 2005. Ironically, the local government minister re-appointed the commission again and extending the commission’s term (6 months) in violation of Section 80 (3) of the Urban Councils Act.

Chirisa and Jonga (2009) sum the firing of mayors and appoint of Zanu-PF commissioners as the “defeat of democracy in council business.” At the height of

<sup>2</sup> Mayors sacked and replaced by commissions: Harare (Mudzuri), Chitungwiza (Shoko), Chegutu (Dhlakama), and Mutare (Kagurabadza).

central government interference in local authorities was the formers' instigation of the infamous Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order in 2005. The Government of Zimbabwe embarked on an operation to "clean filth" in cities on May 19, 2005 in contravention to eviction regulations stipulated under the country's Regional, Town and Country Planning Act (Part V, Section 35<sup>3</sup>) and against the right to housing conferred in Article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Operation Restore Order, a demolition and eviction campaign led by the military and police affected an estimated 700,000 people in cities across the country who lost homes, livelihood sources or both and indirectly affecting 2.4 million people (Tibajjuka 2005). The Operation shows the authority and supremacy of political interference from central government at the same time cementing the relegation of urban councils political and administration authority.

The Minister of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development is not held accountable constitutionally for his actions because local government is not constitutionally empowered (RBZ 2004).<sup>4</sup> Chaos, contestation and confusion characterized Zimbabwe's local government system. Local government legislation that is, the Urban Councils Act, and Regional, Town and Country Planning Act give unrestricted powers to the local government minister who often (ab)use the office for political expediency. Local authorities have been turned into political battlegrounds rather than avenues of service delivery. The resultant effect has been the poor delivery in key human development services such as water and sanitation, housing, education, energy, and transport in local authority areas (Ranger 2007).

The battle to control urban areas saw the Government of Zimbabwe empowering the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA), a government parastatal supreme to all water resources and related infrastructure. In June 2006, the GoZ issued a directive compelling all local authorities to transfer all water and sewer services to ZINWA. The shift was meant to weaken the sphere of influence of local authorities. Most urban councils lost substantially as water and sewer infrastructure were transferred at no cost. ZINWA presided over a cholera epidemic which claimed over 4000 lives (ICG 2009). Realizing the costly mistake it had erroneously committed, Government of Zimbabwe shifted all water and sewer functions to local authorities in January 2009. The move attracted much resistance as ZINWA did not want to relinquish assets as well as the refusal by urban councils to take over a bloated and politically appointed workforce (Muchadenyika 2015c: 1223). The contestation and confusion deepened further after the landmark 2008 elections.

### **Deepening Contestation and Confusion (2008–2012)**

The executive mayoral system was abolished in 2008 and the ceremonial mayoral system was reintroduced (Chirisa and Jonga 2009). The Urban Councils Act was amended to include (i) the abolishment of the executive mayoral system reintroducing the ceremonial mayoral system, and (ii) the appointment of special interests councillors as well as the appointment by the local government minister of ceremonial mayors who did not have to be councillors (Muchadenyika 2015c). It can be argued that reversion to

<sup>3</sup> Powers to remove, demolish or alter existing buildings or discontinue or modify uses or operations or require abatement of injury.

<sup>4</sup> Local government was however enshrined in the constitution through the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe.

the ceremonial mayoral system was as an attempt to scuttle MDC controlled urban councils. Section 114 of the Urban Councils Act gives the local government minister the powers to suspend and dismiss elected councillors. The use of such ministerial powers overshadowed the will of citizens, destabilizing the functioning of a representative democracy. A political party in control of central government can (ab)use section 114 to frustrate citizens choices at local authority level (Musekiwa 2012: 239). Such a legal provision became a vital tool for Zanu-PF in neutralizing MDC-controlled councils.

Unfettered powers of the local government minister such as appointing special interest councillors, senior city management staff and setting conditions of service for councillors, and staff, suspending and dismissing councillors, further increased contestations at urban governance level. The Urban Councils Act allows the local government minister to appoint special interest councillors though one can argue that, there is nothing special they bring to council chambers except Zanu-PF loyalty (Muchadenyika 2015c). In principle, special interest councillors are supposed to cater for special needs of specific groups such as disabled, business, civil society among others. This provides a caveat for some groups who cannot be fully represented based on elected councillors. One can argue that the idea of special interest councillors is principled, civilized, and inclusive. Through Statutory Instrument 94 of 2010, the Minister of Local Government appointed 86 special interest councillors to compliment the 389 elected councillors. Unexpectedly, “most appointed councillors in urban councils turned out to be Zanu-PF candidates who had lost elections” (Musekiwa 2012: 245). Musekiwa (2012: 246) further argues that special interest councillors are there to protect Zanu-PF interests and make MDC-controlled urban councils ungovernable. Though they had no voting powers, special interest councillors provided cover for the ruling party since it had lost local government elections. On the other hand, some special interest councillors were professionals who played a fundamental role in assisting elected officials; the majority of whom had no prior experience in public governance.

The 2008 elections brought major changes to the governance of urban councils as all municipalities, town councils, and town boards remained MDC strongholds, with the MDC winning the majority of Ward seats (EISA 2008). The MDC won 29 and Zanu-PF one out of the 30 urban councils (Chakaipa 2010). Presidential elections were inconclusive heralding the inauguration of the Inclusive Government in January 2009 composed of two MDC formations and Zanu-PF. The election result can be interpreted as increasing trust given to the MDC by urban residents. Such a political construction of the local state brought immense inter-party struggles which destabilized urban governance. The situation got worse as most of the elected councillors were mere party activists with limited or no experiences in public governance.

After 2008, Zimbabwe entered a difficult, tortuous, and protracted transition (Masunungure and Shumba 2012). It was expected that the transition ushers in transitional governance arrangements aimed at improving service delivery. Transitional governance is used here to refer to the systematic introduction of new forms of governance at local government level (Williams 2007). However, as in Table 1, the firing and dismissal MDC elected councillors and mayors during the transitional period deepened urban governance contestations.

During the transition, most urban councils were marked by contestation and confusion as Zanu-PF tried to regain control of the urban constituency. For instance, as

shown in Table 1, between September 2008 and January 2012, 21 councillors were suspended with 16 of them totally dismissed by the minister of local government. All suspended councillors are from the MDC, amply demonstrating the conflict laden nature of urban governance in Zimbabwe. Moreover, in May to June 2012, the local government minister suspended the mayor, deputy mayor, and one councillor in Chinhoyi municipality (Muchadenyika 2013).

## Current State of Urbanization and Service Delivery

Appointees and democratically elected officials form the core of urban administration. The Urban Councils Act (Chap 29: 15) governs the administration of urban areas. As of 2010, there were 7 city councils, 9 municipalities, 11 town councils and 4 local boards (Mushamba 2010). However, Zimbabwe is experiencing a major urban crisis manifesting in the near collapse of public service delivery, especially electricity, pharmaceuticals, transport, and housing (Musemwa 2014). The challenges of housing are shown by widespread proliferation of slums in urban areas with limited or no access to roads, electricity, water, and sanitation (Muchadenyika 2015a).

Urban local authorities have undergone and survived a turbulent political and economic period and have emerged severely battered and bruised (GoZ 2009). Urbanization in Zimbabwe has not been associated with corresponding economic growth and 44 % of Harare's population is composed of young people (5–25 years) (UN-Habitat 2010). The youth bulge puts a huge strain on urban services like housing, employment, education, infrastructure, and participatory governance. For comparative purposes (see Table 2), we look at past, existing, and projected levels of urbanization in Zimbabwe from 1950 to 2050.

The growth of urbanization was accompanied by a tremendous increase in the urban population. Better economic and social service opportunities found in cities explain rural urban migration. To disaggregate Table 2 into city specific population figures, we put into perspective population growth estimates in Zimbabwe's major cities from 1982 to 2012 (as in Table 3).

Since 1982, the Zimbabwean urban population is on the rise (see Table 3). As a result, there is immense pressure on cities to deliver more services to an increasing urban population. Urbanization process in Zimbabwe has led to challenges of urban

**Table 1** Interference of central government in urban councils during the transition period

| Local authority          | No. of councillors suspended | No. of councillors dismissed. | No. of councillors whose suspensions were lifted |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Bindura Town Council     | 3                            | 2                             | 1  |
| Chitungwiza Municipality | 2                            | 2                             |  |
| Harare City Council      | 9                            | 6                             | 3  |
| Rusape Town Council      | 7                            | 5                             | 2  |
| Total                    | 21                           | 16                            | 6  |

Source: Musekiwa 2012: 239

sprawl, urban poverty, inadequate housing for the urban poor, inadequate infrastructure and service provision including clean portable water, sewerage reticulation, power supply, garbage collection and disposal, and inadequate transportation at affordable levels (Munzwa and Wellington 2010). The provision of urban goods and services has not been commensurate with urbanization levels. In addition, the mismanagement, corruption, and contestation in urban councils results in cities failing to provide urban services such as water and sanitation, housing, public transport, and refuse collection (Muchadenyika 2014b).

Urbanization has not been matched with economic growth. As in Table 4, there is a mismatch between urbanization and economic performance of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe's GDP between 1998 and 2006 declined by  $-37\%$  (UNDP 2008). The country's economic crisis devastated the livelihoods of the urban population and created conditions of extreme poverty in towns (Potts 2006a) with formal unemployment "estimated officially at  $90\%$ " (Hammar et al. 2010: 271). In particular, urban poverty is "associated with the development of increasingly informalized urban employment and "illegal" low income housing solutions across the urban hierarchy" (Potts 2006b: 274).

The mismatch between urbanization and economic performance (as in Tables 2, 3, and 4) meant that local authorities were confronted with increased demand on services with limited returns from a receding economy. As such, the reality of urbanization in Zimbabwe resembles "shattered dreams and hopes" due to the deteriorating economy (Potts 2006a). The mismatch exposed urban councils as the main revenue sources (companies) either shut down or relocated to neighboring countries. Inflation, which according to official and conservative government figures exceeded  $8000\%$  a year, with respected economists and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimating a figure in excess of  $150,000\%$  (Coltart 2008) and the depreciation of the Zimbabwean dollar constrained the ability of local authorities to deliver services.

Formal employment decline increased the informal housing and employment sectors of which most local authorities had not planned their cities with informality in consideration. The informal sector in many instances had a free ride on services as their administration and planning became politically contested rather than a town planning matter. Harsh macroeconomic environment made long-term planning difficult resulting in local authorities preoccupying themselves with immediate concerns of survival.

The politico-economic breakdown of the principles of good governance between 2000 and 2008 led to "unemployment, environmental pollution and destruction, non-development and maintenance of infrastructure, shortages of urban transport, inadequate supply of water" (Munzwa and Wellington 2010: 140). Governance; in particular its associated contestations affected service delivery. However, the Zimbabwean urban governance case shows a reverse in civilization as shallow wells replace water taps, blocked storm drains lead to "artificial and

**Table 2** Urbanization levels in Zimbabwe from 1950 to 2050 (in percentages)

| 1950  | 1960  | 1970  | 1980  | 1990  | 2000  | 2010  | 2020  | 2030  | 2040  | 2050  |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 10.64 | 12.61 | 17.36 | 22.37 | 28.99 | 33.76 | 38.25 | 43.92 | 50.71 | 57.67 | 64.35 |

Source: UN-Habitat 2010

**Table 3** Demographic trends in major Zimbabwean towns and cities (1982–2012)

| Name of urban center | Year    |           |           |           |
|----------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|                      | 1982    | 1992      | 2002      | 2012      |
| Harare               | 656 000 | 1,184,169 | 1,435,784 | 1,468,767 |
| Bulawayo             | 414,000 | 621,742   | 676,650   | 655,675   |
| Chitungwiza          | 172,000 | 274,035   | 323,260   | 354,472   |
| Gweru                | 79,000  | 124,735   | 140,806   | 158,233   |
| Mutare               | 70,000  | 131,367   | 170,466   | 188,243   |
| Kwekwe               | 48,000  | 74,982    | 93,608    | 100,455   |
| Kadoma               | 45,000  | 67,267    | 76,351    | 90,109    |
| Masvingo             | 31,000  | 51,746    | 69,490    | 88,554    |
| Chinhoyi             | 24,000  | 42,976    | 55,968    | 79,368    |
| Redcliff             | 22,000  | 24,994    | 32,453    | 35,924    |
| Marondera            | 20,000  | 39,384    | 51,871    | 62,120    |
| Chegutu              | 20,000  | 30,122    | 43,424    | 49,832    |
| Shurugwi             | 13,000  | 6029      | 16,863    | 22,456    |
| Kariba               | 12,000  | 21,039    | 23,820    | 41,420    |
| Victoria Falls       | 8000    | 15,010    | 31 519    | 33,710    |

Sources: Wekwete (1992):54; Government of Zimbabwe (1992, 2002); Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZimStat) (2012))

unnecessary” flooding in streets, uncollected refuse produce stench smell, and pot-holed roads make “normal and straight” driving impossible.

## Explaining Urban Governance Crisis and Service Delivery Failure

There are two competing explanations on service delivery failure in Zimbabwe. One is economic and the other is political. Zimbabwean cities have undergone an

**Table 4** Zimbabwe’s economic performance, 1980–2006

| Economic Indicators                         | 1980–1990 | 1991–2000 | 2001–2006 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Average annual GDP growth (%)               | 4.30      | 0.90      | –5.70     |
| Employment growth (%)                       | 1.90      | 0.40      | –7.50     |
| Inflation in final year of period (%)       | 12        | 56        | 238       |
| Exports as % of GDP in final year of period | 23.00     | 43.00     | 24.00     |
| Manufacturing as % of GDP                   | 20.35     | 17.70     | 15.00     |
| Agriculture as % of GDP                     | 16.20     | 14.90     | 17.00     |
| Mining as % of GDP                          | 4.30      | 4.20      | 4.00      |
| Budget deficit as % of GDP                  | –2.10     | –6.30     | –5.80     |

Source: Government of Zimbabwe 2011:8

unprecedented period of de-industrialization (Sachikonye 1996; Kamete 2006b) owing to economic challenges. In this regard, de-industrialization affected local authorities' revenue base. Other scholars use both economic and political arguments to explain service delivery failure for instance Kamete (2006b: 67) argues that for cities like Harare, a combination of bad governance, unemployment, economic rises, poverty and rising crime contributed to urban blight. On the other hand, other scholars focus purely on the political explanation for example Chirisa (2013) attributes the poor state of service delivery to weak institutions, urban mismanagement, and the reluctance of central government to promote good urban governance. This argument is also supported by Chirisa and Jonga (2009): 178) who points out "poor service delivery, weak administrative institutions, ineffective and inefficient councils, and unaccountable and corrupt urban councils systems" as the result of central government interference in local authorities.

At this stage, it is vital to explain the state and opposition MDC's views on the local government crisis and the subsequent service delivery failure. The Government of Zimbabwe's through its economic blueprint, the Medium Term Plan (MTP) argues that "local authorities have weathered a turbulent economic period, and have emerged somewhat battered and bruised" (Government of Zimbabwe 2011: 68). The position of the government in its economic blueprint raises the potency of the economy in explaining the local government crisis. In particular, government identifies eight key challenges or constraints that affect the sound functioning of local authorities. These are financial non-viability, obsolete equipment, outdated billing systems and accounting packages, inadequate or non-available trunk services, aging onsite infrastructure, and non-complaint internal planning and monitoring systems (Government of Zimbabwe 2011: 68-69).

However, the above stated government position needs to be looked at within a context. The MTP was crafted during the Inclusive Government comprising of MDC and Zanu-PF. Thus, the document falls short of being candid and attributing any failure to any of the two political parties. In fact, the document tried successfully to dissuade any blame to government coalition partners. In brief, it neutralizes the root causes of most development challenges it tries to address.

Contrary to the government's position, the MDC advances that the "local government system in Zimbabwe has suffered from extensive politicization and lack of or poor quality service delivery stemming from over-centralization of power by the local government minister" (MDC 2013a:25). Politicization and centralization are the two key drivers of poor service delivery, the MDC argues. This assumption of the MDC is important in this paper, as the paper underscores the negative impacts of central government interference in local government. In addressing the service delivery impasse, the MDC proposed introducing a legislation outlining, the devolution of authority to local governments, introducing executive mayoral system, reintroducing strict city and town planning standards and guidelines, and prioritizing service delivery (MDC 2013a: 25). To fully explain the tension between Zanu-PF and MDC with regard to local government autonomy, the following paragraphs provide the local government ideologies of both parties.

The position of the MDC and Zanu-PF on local government autonomy in managing local affairs differs significantly. To illustrate this point, we will use the positions of both parties on local government during the constitution making process which ended in 2013. Zanu-PF was against the devolution of power and functions to local



authorities, a position (devolution) that was firmly supported by the MDC (Muchadenyika 2015b). To put this argument into perspective, Zanu-PF made a raft of changes on devolution to the Constitution Select Committee (COPAC) draft constitution of July 17, 2012 as shown on Table 5.

Table 5 shows the devolution struggle that characterized the Constitution making process. Zanu-PF saw devolution as threat to its hold on power and had a strong belief in centralization. This was in contrast to the push in favor of devolution by the MDC, to which the party reiterated its devolution stance by outlining its vision for local government as “to promote devolved local governance that is democratic, sustainable and delivers quality services equitably” (MDC 2013b: 185).

Further to illustrate the divergence of views of Zanu-PF and the MDC on the running of local government affairs, we draw local government aspirations of both parties in the 2013 harmonized election manifestos. Zanu-PF’s 2013 election manifesto leaves out devolution in its list of “goals of the people” the party defended during the COPAC constitution making process (Zanu-PF 2013: 67-73). Not surprising, the 108 page Zanu-PF Manifesto does not even mention the word “devolution” which shows the party’s total disregard of devolution. A big contrast, as the MDC Manifesto takes pride on devolution: “we fought for devolution and it is now a cardinal principle of the new Constitution and we are committed to making sure it works for the people” (MDC 2013a: 6).

From the abovementioned points; it is clear that Zanu-PF’s ideology is centered on control of local government institutions using decentralization as a “façade.” On the other hand, the MDC believes in the devolution of power and functions in which local authorities are given the right to govern in areas of their jurisdiction. The over-

**Table 5** Zanu-PF’s anti-devolution position during the constitution making process

| Section  | COPAC’s position based on Draft Constitution July 17, 2012.   | Zanu-PF’s position in response to COPAC Draft Constitution.  |
|----------|---|--|
| 14.1     | Devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities  | Decentralization of governmental powers and responsibilities   |
| 14.1 (1) | ‘governmental powers and responsibilities must be devolved to provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities’                             | ‘governmental powers and responsibilities must be decentralized to provincial councils and local authorities   |
| 14.1 (2) | The objectives of the devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities to provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities are-       | The objectives of the decentralization of governmental powers and responsibilities to provincial councils and local authorities are -                      |
| 14.2 (1) | Provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities must, within their spheres -   | Provincial councils and local authorities must, within their spheres of jurisdiction -   |
| 14.2 (c) | exercise their functions in a manner that does not encroach on the geographical, functional or institutional integrity of another tier of government; | exercise their functions in a manner that does not encroach on the geographical, functional or institutional integrity of another structure of government; |
| 14.5 (1) | There is a provincial council for each province, except the metropolitan provinces, consisting of -   | There is a provincial council for each province consisting of -  |
| Sec 5    | Tiers of government.  | Structures of government.  |

Source: Muchadenyika 2015b: 121

centralization of power and subsequent central government interference in urban affairs has curtailed the independence and functioning of local authorities.

## Conclusion

The article discussed the context of Zimbabwe's urban governance system by looking at historical and recent trends in urban governance and urbanization. Since colonization in 1890, local government in Zimbabwe kept changing to suit the needs of the government in power. In both pre- and post-independence, Zimbabwe local government is a political muscle that ruling regimes manipulates, associates with and advance certain political interests. Politics continue to shape and destabilize the urban governance system in Zimbabwe as the system remains under incessant threat from central government. The politics, governance, and institutional behaviors in urban centers of Zimbabwe deteriorated severely calling for a restructuring of urban governance with devolution of powers a promising alternative. Center-local contestations are leading to poor service delivery. The promotion of social change through urban governance has been curtailed by contestations among political parties, central, and local governments. The fight between political parties to control the urban constituency and the management of urban affairs has been sustained at the expense of urban service delivery.

Present day urban political realities are contested and service delivery is used as a source and resource for political agency. Opposition parties demonstrate competence and capacity of running national affairs at the local state level. However, as explained in this paper, the ruling party has consistently thwarted opposition initiatives at the local level. Following this argument, central government did not always have an incentive to help local governments improve their performance (Resnick 2014). Put differently, urban governments were seen and treated as breeding ground for regime change. Such a conception necessitated central government to use different strategies to undermine and weaken urban local authorities.

Decentralization as a tool to promote social change through urban governance has largely failed in Zimbabwe. Politics of urban control superseded the intentions of developing and nurturing a sound and autonomous local governance system. As such, inter-party struggles distorted the functioning of urban governance system. The ruling party's relentless aim of centralizing authority and meddling in urban affairs became imbued in what Esser (2012) presented as incomplete decentralization. In particular, Esser (2012) argues that the political impasse prevalent in African cities governed by opposition parties is a result of incomplete decentralization, in which the devolution of functions is not matched with a reallocation of resources. In the Zimbabwean context, local authorities are mandated with key functions such as housing, education, health, transport, water, and sanitation among others. Yet, the government has been reluctant to share a considerable fraction of national revenue to allow the discharge of such services. For that reason, it can be argued that urban governments were designed and set up to fail to deliver services. Central government would use and abuse such failure for political expediency. Perhaps, the central argument of this paper is that governing underfunded, rapidly urbanizing and politically contested sub-Saharan African cities raises questions about what kinds of urban governance arrangements are feasible under these circumstances.

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