

## Review

# Enhancing local governance through local initiatives: Residents' associations in Zimbabwe

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**Residents associations are a local initiative by residents within a specific community. Through residents associations, citizens have been able to keep local authorities in check and to demand accountability. With the economic crises facing many countries across the globe and the world recession setting in, as well as the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe over the last few years, which was exacerbated by a hyperinflationary environment, local authorities have had to contend with shortages of resources to dispense services to local communities. This has increased restiveness on the part of residents. The article eclectically draws from the mobilisation theory whose premise is that a disgruntled citizenry is easy to mobilise. The study of the Combined Harare Residents' Association (CHRA) has shown that residents' associations are a conduit through which residents can demand accountability and participatory spaces in promoting good local governance. This article seeks to explore the extent to which residents associations have enhanced citizen participation and promote good local governance. This article deliberates on the prospects and challenges which residents associations as residents' initiative can enhance citizen participation in local governance.**

**Key words:** Residents association, local governance, local authority, citizen participation, urban residents.

## INTRODUCTION

This article is composed of a theoretical framework that helps lay the foundation for easy comprehension of why mobilisation and collective action can succeed or flop. A local governance perspective framework is given followed by an exploration of the relationship between decentralisation and local governance in an African context. A historical perspective of urbanization and the rise of civil society are provided and how events in urban areas gave rise to the formation of residents association as a mouthpiece for residents. The article explores the impact of associational life in urban areas and how this gave rise to the formation of residents associations to act as a mouth-piece for urban residents. The article ends by presenting how CHRA has worked with other residents associations in other urban areas to either resuscitate defunct ones or help in the formation of new ones.

Available literature has noted that increased community participation in government decision making produces many important benefits (Irvin and Stansbury, 2005: 6). They further maintain that in decisions reached at through community consultation dissent is rare. It is difficult to envision anything but positive outcomes from

citizens joining the policy process, collaborating with others and reaching consensus to bring about positive social and environmental change (Irvin and Stansbury, 2005: 8). With an unprecedented demand from citizens for incorporation of their contributions in the operation of local authorities, residents associations have filled the void that had existed and a link between local authorities and residents. At central government level, legislation governing the devolution and decentralisation of executive powers to local authorities has been enacted; thereby bringing decision-making processes to the door step of the grassroots people. Demands by citizens to participate in the governance of their localities have not been without basis. It is something based on the premise that people have a mandate and duty to contribute to the governance processes, as enshrined not only in the national constitution, but in regional and international protocols and conventions.

The central argument of this article is based on the premise that citizens have the right to participate in governance processes within their geographical boundaries, as enshrined in Article 21 of the Universal

Declaration of Human and People's Rights and Article 13 of the African Charter of Human and People's Rights, both of which concur that "Every citizen shall have the right to participate freely in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives in accordance with the provisions of the law". Consequently, it is on this premise that the author attempts to highlight the establishment of resident associations as a conduit through which residents can contribute to good and transparent governance within their local authorities, especially in budgetary processes which have attracted the attention of residents as poverty took its toll among residents in recent years in Zimbabwe. With the increase in the call for the democratization of local governance, residents have began demanding for participation in local governance as a way of influencing decisions in councils and improving service delivery. The article will take a cue from the activities of the Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA), one of the largest residents associations in Zimbabwe and how it has made strides in promoting citizen participation in local governance. On the same note, it has helped inculcate a civic virtue among other resident associations in other urban polities.

However challenges have been encountered by residents associations as their membership suffers from a number of impediments ranging from low literacy and high poverty levels to the despotic nature of local authority officials. Additionally, some councillors have rudimentary understanding of local authority legislative provisions and modalities, let alone the low literacy levels of some of them. In recent years, CHRA has developed from a local association seeking to address issues of service delivery to one which attempts to influence issues of a national magnitude by compelling political authorities to address national issues such as economic development and constitutionalism.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

John (1998) drawing from Tilly (1978) notes that mobilization theory focuses on the social processes of collective action. Notably, this involves how interests come to be defined as common or oppositional, the processes by which groups gain the capacity to act collectively, and the organization and opportunity requirements for collective action. In the case of residents association, these act as a rallying point through which citizens can confront the local authority demanding improved service delivery, transparency and participatory good governance. Given that disgruntled residents have common problems, residents associations find it easy to mobilize these into confronting the local authority. This is further supported by Kelly (1998) whose interest in mobilization theory is in exploring how people come to see their interests as a common concern and generate within a group, a feeling of injustice, which is powerful enough to move an individual reaction or attitude to a collective response.

Various elements of relationships and social interactions are seen as important in generating this sense of injustice and persuading people to come together in collective action in the trade union context. In particular, the actions of key union activists or union leaders are seen as crucial in promoting group cohesion and identity, persuading members of the costs and benefits of collective action and defending the collective action taken in the face of counter-mobilization.

Overall, mobilization theory is useful in its focus on social processes and in highlighting the multi-faceted nature of participation and activism in trade unions. Mobilization theory emphasizes the need to try and gauge the extent to which members identify with the union organization and the degree of interaction, or density of social networks amongst members. However, there are gaps in the analysis. However, mobilization theory has one major weakness. In particular, improving internal union democracy is not specifically mentioned in the context of mobilization theory. This is even though one might argue that the extent to which someone identifies with a trade union may rest, at least partly, on how far one feels that their interests are represented correctly, and can trust that union leaders act in one's best interests.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY, DECENTRALISATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE**

The local government transformation and decentralization processes underway in Sub-Saharan Africa have opened space to better participate in decision-making processes and administration (Matovu, 2006: 5). The challenge facing decision-makers has been to develop models of local governance that can best facilitate the involvement of civil society as well as how and how much civil society can contribute to the establishment of good governance in a sustainable way. Scholars have provided varied definitions of the concept of civil society, with the most common definition referring to civil society as organizations through which citizens participate and exert influence over public life. Manor (1999: 34) maintains that it can be understood as "organized interests with a significant degree of autonomy from the state". Swilling (1994: 4) offers the view that civil society consists of locally constituted voluntary organizations, which have the capacity to influence and even determine the structure of power and the allocation of resources. These are institutions that exert pressure and control as "watch-dogs" on state institutions in the area of governance and development, and jealously guard their autonomy and identity. Mamadou (1996: 78) argues that many African countries are characterized by an institutional disconnect between formal modern institutions trans-planted from outside and indigenous, informal institutions rooted in local culture. Formal institutions include the entire government machinery; from ministries to local

governments. Civil society organizations exist as political organizations, trade unions, human rights groups, community-based organizations, and others (Fung and Wright, 2001: 8). As a rule, civil society organizations adhere to the following principles: Participation, transparency, accountability, equity, effectiveness and efficiency, strategic vision, and good management.

In theory, a vibrant civil society can contribute to effective institutional development and democratic decentralization, enhance the responsiveness of government institutions, increase the information flow between government and the people, make development projects more sustainable, enhance accountability, transparency and integrity, all of which constitute good governance. However, considering the challenges that face local governance, it might be difficult for government to fully embrace civil society as a pillar of democratic decentralization.

The socio-political and economic crises that engulfed Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s has persuaded state and non-state actors to collective review policy and institutional mechanisms for delivering services and foster development. Citizens demand quality services, while city managers lack the resources and morale to perform. One of the reasons civil society groups sprung up in the 1990s was the incapability of local governments to deliver services and fight against poverty and environmental destruction on their own. It is unfortunate, as country experiences reveal, that the two parties (state and civil society) have difficulties engaging in a productive relationship. Hyden (1992: 13) had earlier observed that in most African countries, governmental staff tended to be quite arbitrary in their approach to the people for whom they were designing or executing policies. If the people questioned or resisted arbitrary tactics, the officials resorted to intimidation or other measures aimed at punishing the vocal citizens. This culture continues unabated in spite of decentralization and democratization of governance. In Uganda, public officials are wary of civic associations, not least because of their role as vocal advocates for the disadvantaged, and are therefore reluctant to allow them to play a more active role in public affairs. Councillors tend to believe that civil society thrives on sowing seeds of political discontent and on challenging the legitimacy of the councils. In Zimbabwe, the liberation background of the country which forced it to adopt a socialist/communist stance, tend to view non-state actors as saboteurs who should be guarded against or even avoided at all costs. Consequently local governance in Zimbabwe is heavily politicised with the ruling political party calling the shots to municipal authorities.

## **ASSOCIATIONAL LIFE IN URBAN AREAS IN COLONIAL ZIMBABWE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

Zimbabwe's Local Government system dates back to 1891 when the Salisbury Sanitary Board was established

(Wekwete, 2006: 109). The Urban Councils Act was preceded by the Municipal Act (1930). A number of other pieces of legislation facilitated the carrying out of most of additional functions by Urban Councils. For example, the Services Levy Act (Chapter 78) have enabled Urban Councils to impose a levy on employers of African labour, which funds can be used to subsidize housing and urban transport services for Africans in urban areas (Palley, 1996: 630). However, the dynamic nature of Zimbabwe's political landscape brought about principally by the democratic decay that has characterized Zimbabwe's politics in recent years has brought all the previously cited benefits to African urbanites to an end.

Lwanga-Ntale et al. (1999: 46) have cited various factors as the cause of civil society's rapid growth in urban areas. Firstly, urban citizens are more enlightened and sophisticated than their rural counterparts. As a result, they are interested in establishing independent space outside the direct control of the state to escape political and economic oppression and improve their living conditions. Secondly, indigenous associations receive external assistance from international organizations which enhance their propensity to engage the state and improve their operations. Thirdly, the conditionalities imposed on governments to liberalize and democratize lead to state withdrawal from the provision of basic services, thereby giving citizens the opportunity to exercise some control over their lives.

Ordinarily, the existence of Africans in urban areas was prohibited under colonial legislation unless they were providing cheap labour in mines and factories. Colonial authorities saw it necessary to have some control of Africans in urban areas by putting in place laws that would govern their freedoms of association, movement, and even assembly. This justifies the enactment of laws which required every African to possess a pass indicating their names and that of their employer where applicable. With the advent of increased industrialization in the 1930s and 1940s, the number of Africans in urban areas correspondingly increased, leading to the development of formal settlements.

Associational life amongst Africans in the towns tended to be as temporal and ephemeral as the periods spent by migrant workers in the early urban settlements (Moyo et al., 2001: 23). For the colonial state, up until the 1940s, "...the urban space was considered European space in which blacks were to be allowed for short periods of time" (Moyo et al., 2001: 32). In the language of the colonialists, the urban spaces were coterminous with modernization and therefore antithetical to African tradition and control (Moyo and Makumbe, 2000: 23). It is therefore not surprising that Africans were largely located in rural areas where reserves had been created for them by the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, and those in urban areas were settled in designated areas with limited recreational and housing facilities.

With further increased industrialization, the number of workers in urban areas also increased and this led to the

development of larger cities like Salisbury and Bulawayo that had large industrial concerns. This also led to the formation and prominence of organizations residents' associations that would engage authorities in improving the living conditions of urban residents. However, in the early days, the residents associations were limited in scope and attempted to address those issues that the colonial administration did not consider sensitive, such as demanding equality with whites in terms of job opportunities and living standards. The emergence of residents associations in tandem with trade unionism gave birth to militancy as the colonial administration refused to consider Africans as equal human beings. The militant spirit manifested itself through more demands for citizens' rights in all aspects of life. This was the genesis of trade unionism which according to the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1951 was illegal. With the advent of greater industrialization and urbanization in the 1940s and 1950s more African migrated to urban areas in search of job opportunities, resulting in an upsurge in the African population in towns.

As industrialisation further grew in leaps and bounds, more labour was required and recruited, leading to the growth of cities. This had a knock-on effect on the formation of new groups like township resident associations which emerged initially with the aim of fighting for the rights of urban residents, but later working in league with the emerging liberation movements for political emancipation of the African people not only in urban areas, but even in rural areas. With the passage of time, these resident associations began to diversify their engagement with the colonial administration by challenging the white economic and political order. They began to demand for the observance of human rights, universal suffrage and enfranchisement, political representation and improved living and working conditions for Africans.

With the attainment of political independence in Zimbabwe in 1980, much of the colonial legislation was reversed in an attempt to democratise local governance. Through the Urban Councils Act (1993) residents were empowered to form residents associations through which citizens would make representations to the local authority. These are associations through which residents can participate and influence the decision-making processes in the local governance by having a say in the affairs that affect their lives, especially given that "the post-independence local government system in Zimbabwe was deliberately designed to create a one-party state with the ruling ZANU PF as the one party (Makumbe, 1998: 97). Wekwete (1988) in Makumbe (1998: 86) concurred with the affinity between ZANU (PF) and the whole local government structure by asserting that "the whole local government structure in Zimbabwe is a carbon copy of the ZANU (PF) structure". Councillors and other municipal council officials were elected or appointed on a partisan basis—on the basis of the

strength of support for the then ZANU (PF) party. In some cases, although the Urban Councils Acts requires that the local authority places and advertisement in the media publicising any municipal decisions and budgets for the following year, they have always been aware of the fact that up until the early 1990s, residents in urban areas did not bother themselves about having to partake in the budgetary processes of council.

Attempts at forming residents associations during the early 1980s were viewed by the politicians as unnecessary as that would create acrimony in a newly independent country whose protracted liberation struggle had been a product of a concerted effort by all and sundry. However, continued poor service delivery, water reticulation and sewer bursts uncollected refuse strengthened residents' resolve to solve their own problems with cities and town councils. This resulted in residents having to revisit the concept of residents associations which had existed during the colonial era and to enhance and overhaul the associations into vibrant formations that would not only confine themselves to immediate needs of towns and cities, but extended their demands to incorporate issues of both local and central governance. This is the premise on which Residents Associations in large cities like Harare, Bulawayo, Mutare and Gweru were formed and modelled. Residents such as the Combined Harare Association have contributed to the restoration, promotion and sustenance of elements of democratic institutions through enhancing citizen participation in governance processes.

Recent political developments in which the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) dominated most of urban (and even rural councils) have precipitated a paradigm shift in the composition of most urban councils. This case study would help the author to articulate the extent to which the formation has enhanced citizen participation through engaging government on the plight of urban residents brought about poor service delivery.

The book will also explore how the formation has mobilized the residents around its broad objective of engaging government and campaigning not only for improved service delivery in local government, but to restore democracy in the country through exhorting their members to participate in the constitution outreach programmes, partake in all electoral processes and be involved in the constitution-making process. This mandate by CHRA has out spanned its initial functions and operations which, mostly hinged on local governance and service delivery.

## **DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN ZIMBABWE**

Post-independence amendments to the colonial Urban Councils Act (1996, Chapter 214) resulted in the

democratization of the local government system by removing racial discrimination pertaining to representation and tenure in urban areas (Wekwete, 2006: 98), through the incorporation of former local government areas or African Townships into Urban Council areas (Wekwete, 2006: 99) leading to the enactment of the Urban Councils Act in 1980. In Zimbabwe, with increased industrialization, the number of workers in urban areas grew, leading to the development of larger cities like Salisbury and Bulawayo that had large industrial concerns. This also led to the formation and prominence of organizations residents' associations that would engage authorities in improving the living conditions of urban residents. With the passage of time, these resident associations began to challenge the white economic and political order.

Generally, democratic discourses in governance are informed by such practices as participation, decentralisation and devolution of authority from central government to local structures and to institutions such as municipalities herein referred to as local authorities. Accordingly, terms such as governance; participation and participatory democracy; local governance; decentralisation and devolution have come to dominate the (local) governance parlance and discourse. Governance is about how governments and other social organizations interact, how they relate to citizens, and how decisions are taken in a complex world (Graham and Plumptre, 2003: 2), and involves "...the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social development" (World Bank, 1994; UNDP, 1997). Hyden and Court (1992: 19) view governance as "...the formation and stewardship of the formal and informal rules that regulate the public realm, the arena in which state as well as economic and social actors interact to make decisions". Folscher, in World Bank (2007: 243) notes that increased state effectiveness in service delivery and the creation of citizen participatory spaces is evident of good governance.

In Zimbabwe, all urban areas are divided into high-density (former African) and low-density (former European) areas. As the terms imply, most middle and low income earners reside in high-density areas, and the areas are mostly characterised by large family units and high levels of poverty, hence much more incidences of service breakdown, poor service delivery protests and a source of voices of dissent. The impact of the Structural Adjustment Programme left many casualties in that much of the retrenchments and school drop outs occurred during this time, thereby exacerbating poverty levels among the urban citizens. This has created an increased demand on urban authorities for improved service delivery. High poverty levels in urban areas and a demand for better service delivery against the backdrop of worsening service provision in all urban areas brought about by the sanctions has culminated in the emergence of a militant urban population whose knowledge of their

rights as citizens goes beyond that of the early 1980s when citizens treated the ruling party and government as entities beyond reproach, a population whose resolve to meet their objectives could see them employing any mobilisation strategy available to them. All these factors have implications for democratic representation of the citizens residing in the two different urban residential areas. The fact that the two groups of people reside in urban settings have a bearing on their political consciousness, as noted by Makumbe (1998: 67) who argues that "urban areas tend to have a significantly higher level of political consciousness than rural areas, at least in Zimbabwe". Makumbe further notes that resident' associations "have become fora for opposing national government policies, especially those that impinge on citizens' rights" (Makumbe, 1998: 87).

In participatory democracy "...citizens should have direct roles in public choices or at least engage more deeply with substantive political issues and be assured that officials will be responsive to their concerns and judgments" (Cohen and Fung, 2004: 27). Gaventa (2006: 150) regards participatory governance as "...deepening democratic engagement through the participation of citizens in the processes of (local) governance". In participatory democracy, citizens should be actively involved in matters that affect them by demanding accountability from the state ensuring government's responsiveness to service delivery and other societal needs (Jones and Weale, 1999: 91). This justifies why citizens call on elected officials to account.

The World Bank (2007: 191) points out that "...specific legislation governs sub-national governments through the constitution which recognizes local government and prescribes the need for civic participation in local matters". Zimbabwe's local government system dates back to 1891 when the Salisbury Sanitary Board was established under the Urban Councils Act to look at the sanitary needs of an increasing African population in the then capital city of Salisbury (Wekwete, 1988: 1: 19). The Urban Councils Act was preceded by the Municipal Act (1930). A number of other pieces of legislation facilitated the carrying out of most of additional functions by Urban Councils. For example, the Services Levy Act (Chapter 78) empowered Urban Councils to impose a form of levy on employers of African labour, which funds could be used to subsidize housing and urban transport services for Africans in urban areas (Palley, 1996: 630).

The impact of the Structural Adjustment Programme has left many casualties in its wake because much of the retrenchments and school drop outs occurred during this time, thereby exacerbating poverty levels among the urban citizens, mostly in high density areas and informal settlements as the state became increasingly bankrupt a could not afford to subsidise basic commodities and services. This happened on the backdrop of an unprecedented increase in quality and improved service delivery by citizens in urban areas, giving residents

associations' homework as to how they were going to engage local authorities on the same issue. High poverty levels in urban areas and a demand for better service delivery against the backdrop of worsening service provision in all urban areas brought about by the sanctions imposed on the country by western governments further exacerbated the quagmire in which local authorities found themselves in. Subsequently, this catch22 situation contributed to the creation and emergence of a militant urban population whose knowledge of citizen entitlements went beyond that of the early 1980s when citizens were satisfied with service delivery that prevailed then, especially at a time when the country's economy was able to sustain the population. The Structural Adjustment Programme left a trail of economic disaster, leading to increased poverty and the inability of local councils being unable to sustain their constituencies, resulting in poor service delivery in most urban councils in the country, especially from the late 1990s. Shortage of clean drinking water and constant sewer bursts became a common sight. These appalling living conditions and low living standards constructed an urban population whose resolve to meet their objectives of demanding good service delivery from the local authorities helped them employ mobilisation strategies akin to those utilised during the colonial era for equitable fair living and working conditions. All these factors held implications for democratic representation of the citizens residing in the different urban residential areas. Resident Associations were able to justify their existence in those areas where these had been established. Where these were not yet established, residents began to mobilise with a view to establish their own resident association with a view to confronting local authorities in demand for improved service delivery and participatory space in council activities, especially in the budgetary processes.

### **RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATIONS AS A CONDUIT FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION**

Residents' associations are voluntary organizations that thrive on the commitment of the citizens to participate. They are attempts by residents to participate in the local governance of their affairs. Participation in these voluntary associations has attracted a lot of controversy in recent years with some associations being accused of extensions of opposition political parties. Irvin and Stansbury (2005: 59) argue that "...because citizen participants are not paid for their time, (such) committees may be dominated by strongly partisan participants whose livelihood or values are strongly affected by the decisions being made, or by those who live comfortably enough to allow them to participate regularly". It has been argued that "...citizen-participation committees such as resident associations, are usually overpopulated with members of the top socio-economic group" (Irvin and Stansbury, 2005) because "...the main priorities [of those

from the low-income groups] are to provide for their families, not spend time in meetings" (Irvin and Stansbury, 2005: 59). However, the composition of CHRA goes against this assumption as the organization is populated by the grieved poverty-stricken citizen in urban areas whose interest is not confined to improved service delivery, but the restoration of democratic institutions in the country, hence their involvement in national programmes like the constitution-making process, election monitoring and petitioning the Minister of Local Government against dismissal of democratically-elected councillors in any town and city in the country.

Residents associations are an old concept, having started during the colonial era when due to the increase in the number of Africans in urban areas, an interest arose around their conditions of living.

These associations have been associated with urban dwellings and during colonial days, with poor living conditions such as over crowdedness, establishment and living conditions in squatter camps (informal settlements) as well as shortage of safe drinking waters and other proper sanitary conditions befitting human habitation. Local authorities became increasingly under pressure from residents to address these issues.

Consequently, urban development and human settlement has brought to the fore issues of good living conditions, proper service delivery and good governance. Historically, associational life amongst Africans in the towns tended to be as temporal and ephemeral as the periods spent by migrant workers in the early urban settlements (Moyo et al., 2001: 23) and were spaces "...coterminous with modernization and therefore antithetical to African tradition and control (Moyo and Makumbe, 2001: 23). The high rates of urban population growth raised the need for a corresponding increase in the provision of quality services. However, urban local authorities lack adequate resources to meet the demand for quality services, which is on the rise as a consequence of political emancipation, high literacy rates and increased global communication. The challenge facing decision-makers has been to develop models of local governance that can best facilitate the involvement of civil society and how much civil society can contribute to the establishment of good governance in a sustainable way. For Mamadou (1996: 79), the challenges of local governance emanates from "...the institutional disconnect between formal modern institutions transplanted from outside and indigenous, informal institutions rooted in local culture namely entire government machinery, from ministries to local governments". It is this 'disconnect' that the CHRA has attempted to address by calling on the local authority to account. Matovu (2006: 69) notes that increasing demands for local government transformation and decentralization "...have opened up spaces for better participation in decision-making processes and administration". In this vein, the Combined Harare Residents Association's activities in attempting to enhance citizen participation in budgetary processes as well as

other democratic overtures will be deliberated upon.

However, while there has been evidence to support the effectiveness of residents associations insofar as influencing policy is concerned, developments theorists argue to the contrary. The World Bank (2000: 56) argues that the ordinary citizens do not have the capacity and ability to influence public policy. To facilitate citizen participation, an appropriate and enabling environment should be created where human rights are observed, democratic structures put in place, the constitution is upheld, and the need to allow civil society unlimited access to the citizenry. Kamete (2009: 64) points out that "...the poor are often untouched by formal civil society organizations; instead they rely on a host of informal associations within their communities that often lack the capacity to influence government decision making, and which are by-and-large limited in number, resources and leverage". However, this is rather a discouraging remark by developmental multilateral institutions that should be canvassing for participatory democracy through citizen involvement in national and local programmes and decision-making processes.

## **THE COMBINED HARARE RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION (CHRA)**

The year 1999 saw a concerted effort by six splinter neighborhood residents' groups-some dating back to the 1940s- merging to form one large institution- CHRA. The Combined Harare Residents Associations became the umbrella body of the capital's residents associations and in recent years has encompassed and affiliated residents associations from different towns and cities in Zimbabwe to enhance local governance institutions in different parts of the country.

Post-independence amendments to the colonial Urban Councils Act (1973 Chapter 214) resulted in the democratization of the Local Government system by removing racial discrimination pertaining to representation and tenure in urban areas (Mutizwa-Mangiza, 1990: 1). This saw the incorporation of former local government areas or African Townships into Urban Council areas (Jordan, 1984: 9), resulting in the enactment of the Urban Councils Act in 1980 subsequently amended in 1983, 1986, 1993 and 1996. The Act empowers citizens to form residents' associations, through which citizens would influence policy making and other local governance processes. This has seen the creation of the numerous residents' associations, all of which are affiliates of the Combined Harare Residents' Association. The Combined Harare Residents Association is the umbrella body of the capital's residents associations and in recent years has encompassed and affiliated residents associations from different towns and cities in Zimbabwe (Figure 1). For purposes of readers, the CHRA will be representative of all residents associations in the country and will act as a microcosm of similar

institutions in Zimbabwe.

CHRA has been taken as a case study because of its magnitude, representing so many satellite residents associations and households around the country. Secondly, the CHRA represents people of all walks of life ranging from the rich to the poor, the formally employed to those in informal sector, the old and the young, the grassroots citizens to the professionals, pensioners and even lodgers, the business sector and the formal households, the Central Business Districts of various towns and cities as well as different suburbs (low-density, medium density and high-density). CHRA also represents those in informal settlements like Epworth where residents' propensity is curtailed by low levels of education. On education and participation, the level of education, Shah (2007: 253) notes that "educational attainment is less important as a determinant of participation than citizens' grasp of their rights to engage in individual and collective action and to hold state actors to account". This leaves citizens with an inborn intuition to want to be part of a solution to problems bedevilling them.

## **ANALYSES**

### **CHRA and the inculcation of a civic virtue in local governance**

Democratic discourse has been able to manifest itself through the Urban Councils Act (1996) which creates participatory spaces for citizens by empowering residents to form social associations such as residents associations whose propensity to democratise decision-making processes at local government is visible through the operations of these associations.

Subsequently, residents' associations portray a legal creation of the Urban Council Act (Chapter 29: 15) which stipulates that residents are entitled to the formation of (an) association(s) that would help to address their concerns as ratepayers and to involve themselves in civic affairs and budgetary processes of the local government authority, thereby enhancing citizen participation in local governance. The Combined Harare Combined Residents' Association (CHRA) is one such creation. In other cities and towns, similar formations have been established and where there were no such social utilities, new ones are being created and defunct one resuscitated. Residents associations have not existed in a vacuum, especially in the mammoth task of fighting for democracy and the establishment of democratic structures in all spheres of government. As a result, the association has often worked with other members of the pro-democratic civil society movement in the country.

As marketing and commemoration strategy and a member of the international community, the Combined Harare Residents' Association has, on several occasions, joined the world in commemorating various significant ceremonies, especially the International Day for



Figure 1. Map of Zimbabwe showing difference towns and cities where residents' associations are found.

Democracy, which is commemorated every 15<sup>th</sup> day of September, each year. This is in line with its vision which is 'to be an effective watchdog and vehicle for good governance [in Harare] and as a model for advocacy', a vision which is a significant pointer to its quest for a democratic dispensation in local governance in the country. In recent years, the International Day For Democracy has come at a time "when the nation of Zimbabwe is going through local and national governance crises that is a result of the failure by political leaders to observe the tenets of democracy" (CHRA, 2009)<sup>1</sup> and afford the people of Zimbabwe free participatory spaces and freedom to partake in authentic electoral processes<sup>2</sup>.

CHRA has, through various initiatives, maintained its space within the fight for democracy in Zimbabwe by engaging with sister residents' associations across the country in addition to other pro-democratic civic groupings

in the country. This has been at various fora where the association has advocated for good local governance and the participation of residents in local governance issues in Harare, and beyond. For residents' associations which were formed at the same time as CHRA, like in Bulawayo, the second capital city of the country, CHRA has been at the forefront of trading notes with the Progressive Bulawayo Residents Association (PBRA) and the Bulawayo United Residents Association (BURA), both of which have since merged to form the Progressive United Bulawayo Residents Association (PUBRA).

CHRA has also been pivotal in capacitating other residents' associations like Chitungwiza Residents and Ratepayers' Association (CHIRRA), Masvingo United Residents and Ratepayers Association (MURRA) and others to fight for the same cause. In addition to capacitating existing residents associations, CHRA has also embarked on helping in the resuscitation of defunct old structures of residents associations which had since ceased to function in areas like Kwekwe, Shurugwi, Kadoma and Gweru. It has also been instrumental in the formation of new residents associations in smaller towns like Norton, Chinhoyi and Karoi. Plans are also underway to help setting up of similar structures in growth points,

<sup>1</sup> CHRA and the quest for Democracy in Local Governance; Available on [www.chra.org](http://www.chra.org) [Accessed 23 February 2009]

<sup>2</sup> Refer to the article Mapuva, J (2010) "Militarization of Public Institutions, Flawed Electoral Processes and Citizen Participation" in J. Legislative Stud., Volume 16, Number 4 (December 2010).

many of which have attained town status in recent years, like in Bindura, Gokwe, Gutu, Chibi and Mwenezi.

Campaigns by CHRA and other residents associations across the country against continued privatisation of waters services resulted in the government discontinuing the provision of water and handing it back to local authorities as had been the case over the years. The association believes that the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Water and Infrastructural Adjustment and the City of Harare where the City of Harare will resume its duties of delivering water to Harare residents is a result of the pressure that was put on the Ministry by the residents.

### **Residents and the participatory process**

In theory, many countries provide for some form of consultation or participation during the budget process. This is to enable citizens to make contributions (input or objections) to the local authority. This has usually occurred mainly at the beginning of the process and in only a few countries is public input solicited after the final budget has been put together. Although, the budget process allows for consultation and/or participation, it is not always clear that input from citizens is taken seriously. In many cases, the budget still appears to be driven by officials and to lesser extent councillors although it is a by way of formality that the budget is gazetted or flighted in the media for citizens to respond. However, officials are well aware that many citizens (especially those in high density) do not bother to consult newspapers for such budgets, preferring to spend their time on fending for their families. To the ordinary citizens, the budget figures as they appear in the media are meaningless and appear to be a list of financial statements or figures.

Local government in Zimbabwe is governed by the Urban Councils Act and the Rural District Councils Act. In addition to carrying out the functions and powers detailed in these acts, local authorities can make policy through bylaws, regulations, and resolutions dealing with local planning and development. This translates to the fact that local government authorities have the power to manage their own fiscal revenues and expenditures, subject to national framework conditions and can thus be viewed as semi-autonomous.

At the same time, local government in Zimbabwe uses a variety of instruments for public consultation. These include the government gazette; notices calling for objections in more than one issue of the newspaper; public notices at the local authorities' offices; ministerial commissions; ministerial investigations; consultation with local authority; councillor input; ward development committees; the right of the community to attend council meetings; the right of citizens to make copies of bylaws, budgets, resolutions, and voter rolls; and council

subcommittees. According to Shah in World Bank (2007: 204) "These mechanisms assume a high degree of literacy and interest in civic matters on the part of citizens and are consistent with a top-down approach" which makes them practically accessible to the general rate payers. Working on these assumptions does not reflect the situation on the ground because not all citizens are privileged enough to have access to most of the cited sources of information nor are they all that literate as well as assuming that most of the citizens are that interested in civic matters unless during a time of crisis such as during gross human rights violations or in an era of bad governance. Although Zimbabwe may be credited with a high literacy rate, it appears that these mechanisms are not as widely used as initially envisaged or as it may appear on paper. Considerations should be put to the fact that many citizens are more concerned with immediate bread-and-butter issues and in most cases do not spare time to politicking.

Additionally, the current Constitution of Zimbabwe which has been in use for almost three decades does not make detailed provisions for local government and the only enabling legislation, the Urban Councils Act advocates for consultation rather than participation, which means that local authorities are not compelled to incorporate residents but may consult them on issues that they think are necessary to do so (Bossuyt, 2010). This puts residents at the mercy of local authorities which, constitutionally, are empowered to make decisions for and on behalf of residents. In Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia local government legislation is such that citizens are not included in the decision-making process "...but are permitted to make public objections after decisions have been made" (World Bank, 2007: 195) by technocrats in municipalities. This makes a mockery of the citizens who, in the first instance, are the very people from whose payments the local authority thrives.

However, there have been attempts by the Urban and Rural Councils Act to adopt a grassroots approach, beginning with development committees in each branch/village, district and provincial levels, usually chaired by a local councillor and this has attempted to bring decision-making issues to the door step of every citizen. The main function of these development committees is "...to prepare and submit an annual development plan to the local councillor/s who would then make recommendations to a full council meeting attended by council officials so that such plans can be incorporated into the annual and long-term development plans of the city or town (World Bank, 2007: 205).

Given this window of opportunity created by such interactions, and despite various non-committal nature of existing legislation, CHRA has made attempts to approach the Harare City Council to have input from residents incorporated into the financial budgets of the City of Harare through the use of local councillors. CHRA has also made use of a number of mobilizing strategies to

draw the attention of the local authorities of rate payers' grievances. Additionally, CHRA has employed various mobilization strategies and modes of engagement in its engagement with the city council on behalf of rate payers in particular and residents in general including through making presentations to the local authority and in press reports. CHRA has canvassed for public participation in budgetary processes within the City of Harare through its Advocacy Centre and the drop-in-centres where citizens can share with CHRA officials on what they want to see being done to incorporate residents in the affairs of the local authority. Under a press statement entitled "CHRA objects to Council's proposal to borrow"<sup>3</sup> CHRA berated the Combined Harare City Council for extravagance at a time when ratepayers were riling under abject poverty and poor service delivery, with threatening conditions of uncollected refuse and burst sewer pipes exposing residents to a disease outbreak.

CHRA has also demanded accountability on expenditure and income from the City Council Treasury Department. It has come out strongly against the Harare City Council's skewed priorities and demanded that it should be consulted before the Council embarks on projects and purchases of utilities. In its public statement, the Combined Harare Residents' Association (CHRA) has registered its objection to the City of Harare's arbitrary expenditure without recourse to public views and participation with the local authority's resolution to borrow US\$150 000 to service the water channelling and sewer reticulation pipes<sup>4</sup> (CHRA, 2009). CHRA is of the view that such borrowings should have the blessing of the rate payers whose rental and rates are used to service such a debt.

The decision to object to this resolution is informed by the poor prioritization of service delivery issues that have been displayed by the City Council in the past. Recently, the City Council has spent over USD300 000 on purchasing 3 luxury vehicles for the Mayor and two directors at the expense of attending to the poor health facilities within the city. CHRA reiterates that it is not the position of the Association that the council (currently with many projects waiting) must not buy vehicles for the Mayor and its workers. However, the Association makes it categorically clear that it was unnecessary and an act of extravagant expenditure for the council to buy such expensive vehicles at a time when service delivery is at its lowest ebb in the city. The Mayor's car cost USD153 000 while the two Directors' cars cost USD90 000 each, a fortune in Zimbabwean standards and an amount that a can be put to better use that can be beneficial to the generality of residents of Harare (CHRA, 2009). The Association is of the view that such money could have been used to service the water and sewer pipes as well

as procure water treatment chemicals. CHRA also calls on the council to satisfactorily account for the revenue collected from the residents so far, before the council decides to borrow from anywhere, and to reveal how the debt will be serviced and whether the debt will bring about an increase in the rates paid by residents. CHRA has since (and in many similar instances) written to the Mayor expressing its objection to the idea of borrowing this (and various arbitrary) resolution (s). The Association has also mobilised residents and its members to submit letters of objection addressed to the Town Clerk through the association's drop-in points.

As a facilitative measure, CHRA has made provisions for their members and residents to approach the CHRA offices for assistance in this regard. CHRA has since developed a standardized objection letter which residents and members can complete for submission to the Town Clerk. This shows that CHRA remains steadfast and resolved in lobbying for accountability and transparency in local governance in the City of Harare and has even influenced other cities across the country to act the same and has offered to provide the logistics and expertise to equip other residents associations to establish infrastructure for engagement with city and town councils within their respective constituencies throughout the country.

### **The role of councillors as elected officials**

The role of councillors as elected officials has come into the spotlight following questions about their role in council. There has been a quagmire among councillors as role conflict characterizes their operations and functionalities. It has emerged that there is a clash of interest which tends to place councillors in a quagmire as they are forced to place their allegiance to both residents and council simultaneously. What has further exacerbated the quagmire has been the fact that while they may purport to represent local resident who will have elected them into office, they constitute the decision-making machinery of the local authority and in most cases, dispense decisions which impinge on residents' rights and freedoms. They have ended up not knowing whether to serve and represent residents who elected them into office and as council officials whose mandate would be to make policy with the local governance framework. The role conflict comes when councillors as elected officials and council ex-officials are required to act as the voice of residents and at the same time are required to enforce council resolutions some of which are very punitive, especially council resolutions that pertain to residents who default in their payments of council dues.

Discussions that ensued between the author and councillors presented a quagmire as to their role and allegiance in their operations. While in council, it emerged that the councillors form part of the policy-making body, some policies of which infringe residents' rights. As

<sup>3</sup> CHRA objects to Council's proposal to borrow"zimbabwesituation.com. ONLINE publication -z25 September 2009

<sup>4</sup> "CHRA objects to Council's proposal to borrow" ONLINE publication [25 September 2009]

elected officials, councillors partake in the budgetary process of the local authority on behalf of residents, a move rejected by CHRA which argued that these officials are in council not as representatives of residents but as an policy-making machinery of the local authority and as such should not purport to stand in for residents. An example of a council resolution which council reached which infringes residents' rights is where all those residents who are unable to settle their dues will have their water meters or electricity disconnected. This presented councillors with a precarious situation where as elected officials, they should have been seen working for the good of the residents and not making life difficult for them. Some councillors even confessed that they are equally confused as to whether they represent residents in council or they are being used to make resolutions which would injure not only the residents, but their standing and integrity as elected officials who will seek re-election at some stage from the same residents.

What also emerged from informal discussions with councillors was that the fact that councillors are elected on political party lines resulted in them viewing each other with suspicion with some of them using the platform to project objectives of their respective political parties. This has tended to create lack of synergy in council debates as each political party represented herein attempts to gain political mileage by trying to outwit other political parties. This tug-of-war has also created disunity and disharmony. A councillor expressed the view that this lack of synergy was being caused by councillors from ZANU PF who have tasted power for many years and as such, are not able to contend with playing second fiddle to the MDC councillors who are a majority not only in Harare but in all local authorities (urban and rural) across the country. Consequently, the author observed that this lack of synergy has impacted negatively on residents as it impedes on residents' propensity to participate in local governance.

However, the issue of role conflict on the part of councillors was vehemently shot down by Dr. Randal Smith, one of the author's chief respondents, a local government consultant, and a specialist in local governance and working within a local government environment in East London, who argued that councillors should be guided by their citizenship conviction and sense of responsibility more than by their personal instincts or political affiliation and survival. Dr Randal Smith further argued that residents as responsible citizens have a duty and responsibility to ensure that local authority functions and that payment of dues to municipality is part of their responsibility. As such, putting aside issues of politics, measures to enforce compliance by council are necessary. He further noted that once councillors are elected into council they also have a duty and responsibility "to make decisions and enforce them".

Dr Randal Smith concurred with the idea of taking enforcement measures to ensure that residents comply with council decisions, some decisions which might seem

punitive. He expressed the notion that cities and towns should not be allowed to degenerate into ungovernable entities with dilapidated infrastructure due to reneging residents and as such the enforcement of laws and bylaws to curtail disobedience and non-compliance should be upheld. However, he pointed out that there has got to be dialogue between residents and the local authority on how residents should comply and within a given time frame. O'Neill (2008) has pointed out that "a personally responsible citizen is 'good' in the sense of being law abiding and responsible and "...exhibits elements of social citizenship and responsibility". The respondent further noted that both councillors and residents should exhibit elements of citizenship, responsibility, and accountability should be prepared to be called to account on issues that are their realm of responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

The activities of CHRA towards the residents of Harare and how it has managed to mobilise them is indicative of the fact that it has the propensity to influence them into demanding to exercise their rights to participate in local governance as citizens. The demand by residents to be incorporated into the local government budgetary processes further indicates the salient role that residents associations can enhance participatory local governance. However, the calibre of some councillors has been brought into question as some have tended to politicise local governance in favour of their respective political parties at the expense of the electorate. Additionally, some councillors have failed to realise that once they are elected into public office, they should automatically desist from playing partisan politics but should embrace all citizen irrespective of their political affiliation. This is one of the strengths of residents associations which have not operated along partisan lines, but strive to address the needs of all residents.

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