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Civil society, social accountability and service delivery in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Post-2000, the deterioration of Zimbabwe's socioeconomic and political conditions is widely acknowledged as phenomenal and unprecedented. Consequently, government and local authorities are struggling to provide basic services. At the same time, civil society initiatives are promoting transparency and accountability in service delivery. The article explains how civil society coalitions and citizens are promoting and demanding accountability in the delivery of public services by local authorities. In particular, it focuses on four critical issues; namely local authority–citizen engagement, social accountability focus areas, social accountability tools and emerging social accountability issues. The article concludes that civil society-led social accountability initiatives are effective under conditions of civil society capacity, institutionalization of social accountability by local authorities, and negotiating local political dynamics.

KEYWORDS

civil society, local authorities, service delivery, social accountability, Zimbabwe

1 | INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that the capacity and ability of the state and its institutions is key in public service delivery (Shah, 2005; Bates, 2008; Rotberg, 2004; Brinkerhoff, 2011). However, as discussed in this article, the Zimbabwean state shows weak capacity, often leading to public service delivery failure.

Post-2000, Zimbabwe went at phenomenal speed from being a regional leader (in Southern Africa) to becoming an international pariah (Gretchen & Scott, 2011). In particular, Zimbabwe recorded unprecedented regression in key human development indicators as the state failed to provide public goods and services to its citizens. As such, service delivery collapsed at both central and local government levels. At local government level, local authorities address critical issues of service delivery in the daily lives of the population (Kamete, 2003). However, local authorities are failing to provide water, sanitation, health, education, transport and housing services to citizens. The magnitude of service delivery collapse is typified by a cholera epidemic which claimed over 4,000 lives (ICG, 2009); the highest fatality rate in Africa over a 15-year period (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013). Admittedly, in urban Zimbabwe, the urban governance crisis has led to service delivery failure (Muchadenyika & Williams, 2016).

Available evidence suggests that Zimbabwe's socioeconomic and political context is in crisis, and thus detracts from the state's potential to provide services to citizens. For example, the country appears to be experiencing a near total economic and environmental catastrophe. This entails non-functional education and health systems, poverty and patriarchy, starvation and unemployment, corruption and violence (Hoffman, 2012), making it important for citizens to collectively act with a view to salvage the situation. At the genesis of the socioeconomic crisis, and over the years, civil society grew in stature and power. Comparatively, this led to citizens having more trust in civil society and non-governmental organizations than the government. However, there exist civil society and state-centred struggles mainly over democratic change and agrarian transformation (Helliker, 2012). In this regard, the hope for change seem to have vanished with yet another disputed July 2013 election. The election results put far in sight the possibility of returning to legitimate, functioning and accountable state institutions.[1]

Zimbabwe's Constitution adopted in 2013 provides a new governance culture premised on active citizen participation and responsive public institutions. Civil society has taken advantage of the new dispensation to promote diverse social accountability initiatives. As such, the aim of this article is to present how coalitions of civil society organizations and citizens are demanding accountability in the delivery of public services by local authorities. Data underpinning this article were collected through key informant interviews, focus group discussions and organizational capacity assessments.[2] In particular, key informant interviews and capacity assessments were conducted in seven civil society organizations promoting social accountability in different local authorities. Moreover, key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with heads of department (water, housing, administration, engineering and finance) from seven local authorities and 45 community members in the seven local authorities, respectively.

The article is structured into seven sections. Section 2 provides the background to Zimbabwe's crisis and the subsequent failure of public service delivery at both central and local government level. Section 3 explains social accountability as the framework of analysis. Zimbabwe's context in relation to social accountability is discussed in Section 4. Section 5 presents and discusses the empirical evidence organized around civil society social accountability initiatives. Based on study findings, Section 6 presents prospects and constraints for civil society work. Finally, Section 7 states the key conclusions of the article.

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[1]The elections brought to an end the Inclusive Government which had managed to stabilize the economy with production capacity in the manufacturing sector increasing beyond 50%, public services such as education and health were rebooted. The elections saw Zanu-PF, the party mainly responsible for the country's crisis, become the main ruling party.

[2]This analysis is based on field work conducted in Zimbabwe between September and October 2014.

2 | STATE COLLAPSE, RAPID REGRESSION AND PUBLIC SERVICES

Beginning 1997, three key events weakened the state's capacity and role in public service delivery. The crash of the Zimbabwean dollar on Friday, 14 November 1997 is widely recognized as the genesis of the country's socioeconomic and political crisis. The Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) issued huge unbudgeted gratuities to war veterans, triggering the loss of half of the value of the Zimbabwean dollar in a single day (ICG, 2004). Further, the economy was destabilized by the GoZ's threat to acquire 1,500 commercial farms, mounting public debt, corruption accusations, job lay-offs and disenchantment with rising prices (Dore, 2009, p.12). In response, the government introduced tougher and unpopular economic controls.

Food riots broke out after a 21% increase on maize-meal in January 1998. Government responded through a heavy crackdown on mass protests led by the army. It can be argued that the response of the government, through arrests, torture and live bullets, strained state–citizen relations. The crisis of the state reached a climax in August 1998, when Zimbabwe sent troops to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as an international donor (Tsvangirai, 2012, p.186). The war in DRC was costly to Zimbabwe and further affected the role of the state in public service delivery. In addition, most citizens did not support the DRC intervention, as they thought it was for personal and selfish gains of elements of the ruling elite.

Post-2000, Zimbabwe glided into becoming a 'world's pariah where an oppressive state shows little respect for the rule of law, where human rights are abused, the media restricted, and the president apparently all-powerful' (OSISA, 2007, p. 146). The Lancaster House Constitution gave the president vast powers, which were however not subject to Constitutional restraints (Linington, 2012, p.64). Mounting pressure to review the Lancaster House Constitution from the civil society culminated in the rejection of a government draft Constitution in the February 2000 referendum. As a response to waning support, and rejection of the draft Constitution, government initiated a disputed land reform programme to bolster its support. In June 2001, the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, aimed at taking and redistributing white-owned commercial farms to black Zimbabweans began in earnest (GoZ, 2001).

The international community's response to the looming Zimbabwean crisis deepened the crisis and further weakened the state. In 2001, the United States government enacted the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act aimed at providing a 'transition to democracy and promoting economic recovery in Zimbabwe' (US Congress, 2001). The Act excluded the Zimbabwe Government from access to development finance from the Bretton Woods institutions (Muchadenyika, 2016). The US Government cancelled official development assistance (ODA) directed through government channels, preferring non-state actors involved in governance, democracy and humanitarian work (UNDP, 2008).

On 18 February 2002, the European Union (EU) introduced restrictive measures against the Zimbabwe Government (European Council, 2002). The European Council Decision was premised on violence escalation, intimidation of political opponents, harassment of independent press and infringement of the right to freedom of speech, assembly and association, and the violation of norms and standards for free and fair elections. Subsequently, the EU provided aid through non-state actors. With little access to ODA, the state was weakened and non-state actors became stronger and more vocal in the delivery of public services.

On the economic front, the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declined by 37% between 1998 and 2006 (Zimbabwe Institute, 2007, p.37). Hunger, poverty and vulnerability characterized living conditions in Zimbabwe. By 2006, life expectancy had dropped to the lowest in the whole world:

34 for women and 37 for men (UNDP, 2008, p.11). Zimbabwe's rapid regression accelerated between 2008 and 2009. A comparison of development conditions between 1999 and 2009 show civilization in reverse as the country fell from being the bread basket of Africa to being a 'basket case.' The once thriving agriculture had collapsed with a quarter of the population fed by the international community.

From January 2008 the Zimbabwean dollar completely lost its value. The Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe printed and introduced up to a trillion new bank notes. Unofficially, citizens shifted to the US dollar, the South African rand and the Botswana pula in order to cope. The delivery of public services was at near collapse though 60,000 of the 140,000 teachers remained at their posts and 30% of government health workers were still at their posts (Dore, 2009, p.18). The largest and oldest university (University of Zimbabwe and the Medical School) closed indefinitely in January 2009, citing critical water shortages and the largest public hospital (Parirenyatwa Hospital) closed operations. Such developments, along with a cholera outbreak, highlight the level of service delivery failure. Mbeki (2009, p.101) argues that the Zimbabwean case was an instance of a failed African state in which everything had gone wrong—economics, politics, foreign policy and public health—to the detriment of the Zimbabwean people.

Put simply, the state was unable to perform its functions. In a way, the state lost credibility, and legitimacy, to local, regional and international institutions. The state's basic role of providing public services was severely weakened due to capacity and legitimacy constraints. The Southern African Development Community intervened, and called for an early harmonized election in March 2008, as a way to curtail the socioeconomic and political impasse (Raftopoulos, 2010). The harmonized elections ushered in a transitional phase guided by the Global Political Agreement, and for some time government managed to restore public services (Barclay, 2010). The harmonized elections of 2008 ushered in an Inclusive Government which managed to stabilize the economy and resume public service delivery (Musemwa, 2014).

2.1 | Local authorities and service delivery failure

Zimbabwe has 92 local authorities, 60 rural and 32 urban. These local authorities have undergone and survived a turbulent political and economic period, and have emerged severely battered and bruised (GoZ, 2011). The country's urbanization level stands at 33% which translates to 4,310,208 people living in urban centres (ZimStat, 2013), though urbanization has not been associated with corresponding economic growth (UN-Habitat, 2010). Zimbabwe's GDP between 1998 and 2006 declined by 37% (UNDP, 2008). The divergence between urbanization and economic growth means that 'local authorities were confronted with increased demand for services with limited returns from a receding economy' (Muchadenyika & Williams, 2016, p.266). The relocation and shutdown of industries severely affected local authority revenues. Inflation and the depreciation of the Zimbabwean dollar grounded the service delivery capacities of local authorities.

The growth of urbanization was accompanied by a sharp increase in the urban population (Munzwa & Jonga, 2010). As a result, there is immense pressure on cities to deliver more services to an increasing urban population. The urbanization process in Zimbabwe has led to challenges of urban 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 & Jonga, 2010). The provision of urban goods and services has not been commensurate with urbanization levels. The mismanagement, corruption and contestation in urban councils results in local authorities failing to provide urban services such as water and sanitation, housing, public transport and refuse collection (Muchadenyika, 2014).

Munzwa and Jonga (2010, p.140) argue that the political and 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, and inadequate supply of water.' Services provided by local authorities are an important determinant of human development. However, the failures of consistent water supply, uncollected refuse, derelict roads, uncoordinated housing developments, load shedding all point to catastrophic service delivery. The politics, governance and institutional behaviours in Zimbabwe's local authorities have severely deteriorated, to the extent that a reengineering of urban governance is required (Muchadenyika, 2014).

Thus, service provision among local authorities in Zimbabwe is a matter of trying to make something out of a crisis situation (RTI & IDAZIM, 2010, p.48). Most of the service infrastructure is old, dilapidated and neglected. A comprehensive infrastructure assessment by the African Development Bank points to severe decline in infrastructure quality and capacity, low levels of maintenance and high costs of infrastructure services (AfDB, 2011). Infrastructure provides a springboard for service delivery; without it, service delivery collapses. Comparatively, when central government failed to provide services, it is the local authorities that delivered the basic services (Musekiwa, 2012), though at a faltering level.

3 | SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY: FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Social accountability, especially as a subject of state institutions to citizens, is in vogue (Fox, 2015; Grandvoinnet, Aslam, & Raha, 2015). To that end, a number of studies have been conducted aiming to conceptualize, describe and assess social accountability (Joshi, 2008; Joshi, 2013; Arroyo & Sirker, 2005; McNeil & Mumvuma, 2006; Claasen & Alpin-Lardiés, 2010; Ringold, Holla, Koziol, & Srinivasan, 2012; Joshi & Houtzager, 2012; O'Neil, Foresti, & Hudson, 2007; Sirker & Cosic, 2007; Malena, Forster, & Singh, 2004; Gaventa & McGee, 2013; Tembo, 2012). It is thus important to create mechanisms of accountability to citizens on the part of the state and to improve service delivery (Goetz & Gaventa, 2001; Mehrotra, 2006). However, in practice citizens face a widening gulf between themselves and the powerful institutions that are meant to serve them (Mulgan, 2003, p.1). Various authors have put forward definitions of accountability as including enforceability and answerability, holding actors responsible for their actions, keeping the public informed and the powerful in check (Shedler, Diamond, & Plattner (Eds.), 1999; Cornwall, Lucas, & Pasteur, 2000; Mulgan, 2003; Newell & Wheeler (Eds.), 2006).

This article adopts the definition by Grandvoinnet, Aslam, and Raha (2015, p.3) which views social accountability as the interplay of both citizen and state action, supported by three 'levers'; namely information, interface and civic mobilization. The goal of social accountability is initiating demand-driven and bottom-up citizen voice and oversight in public service delivery. Thus, social accountability strategies try to 'improve institutional performance by bolstering both citizen engagement and the public responsiveness of states and corporations' (Fox, 2015, p.346). Two main actor categories are crucial in social accountability, namely state and non-state actors. State actors include the executive, oversight institutions (legislature and audit institutions) and the judiciary, while non-state actors include citizens, civil society organizations, media, development partners and the private sector (World Bank, 2013). The role of state actors is mainly to provide services. As a state actor, local authorities in Zimbabwe are responsible for the provision of services to their areas of jurisdiction (Mushamba, 2010).

4 | ZIMBABWE'S CONTEXT IN RELATION TO SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Social accountability takes place within a context, be it political, economic, social or legal. Zimbabwe's context is fluid and often changes in a very short space of time. For success, social accountability requires an enabling environment (Fox, 2015). In that regard, the article explains the socioeconomic, legal and policy, and political, environment that promotes and inhibits the practice of social accountability in Zimbabwe.

4.1 | Socioeconomic environment

Since the 2013 elections, the economic gains made by the country during the Inclusive Government have regressed. Key economic indicators, such as massive closure of companies, high rates of unemployment, a liquidity crunch and growing poverty significantly reduce local authorities' revenue bases. Further, after the disputed 2013 elections, key economic sectors contracted, and the government struggles to pay wages and provide basic services (ICG, 2014, p.1). In this regard, state institutions are finding it difficult to deliver on Constitutional obligations. To address the present situation, calls have been made to develop a 'pro-poor and inclusive development strategy' with an emphasis on reconstituting the state, and transforming it into a democratic, and accountable developmental state (Kanyenze, Kondo, Chitambara, & Martens, 2011). However, the country's economic blueprint, the Zimbabwe Agenda for Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim Asset), is proving to be nothing more than political rhetoric and has not been backed with resources to achieve its aims.

The present economic environment negates public and social accountability as socioeconomic problems constrain the integrity of accountability mechanisms. Public institutions are weak, with high incidences of corruption and abuse by public officials and politicians (Naing, 2012). As a result, it would seem that citizens and other stakeholders (civil society and business) have lost confidence in the government, local authorities and the delivery of public services. Further, out-migration as a result of economic collapse has had negative impact on Zimbabwe's human capital base (Makina, 2012), with the exodus of professional and skilled manpower severely affecting staffing, competence and skill levels in government and local authorities.

4.2 | Governance institutions and structures

The Constitution of Zimbabwe includes a number of institutions and mechanisms that seek to enhance accountability of government institutions. These are summarized in Table 1.

It is the aspects explained in Table 1 which are being used by civil society as anchors of social accountability initiatives. At the same time, there are still impediments to social accountability imbued in existing local government legislation, relations between the government and civil society, and the politics of local government control. The existing laws that governs local authorities (Rural District Councils Act, Urban Councils Act) apportion too much power to the local government minister (Musekiwa, 2012; Machingauta, 2010; Muchadenyika, 2013), and these powers have been used to curtail accountability relationships between local authorities and citizens. These Acts are undergoing reform, but the new local government Bills have not sufficiently transitioned from the Acts they seek to repeal, particularly as they did not transform the relationships between the executive (President and Minister) and local authorities (Chatiza & Chakaipa, 2014). Thus, the right of local communities and local authorities to manage their own affairs is being undermined.

TABLE 1 Constitution-Related Social Accountability Enablers

Aspect	Explanation
Devolution	Rights of communities to manage their own affairs, and promoting a democratic, effective and accountable government.
Fundamental human rights and freedoms	Freedom to demonstrate and petition (Section 59), freedom of expression and media (Section 61), and access to information (Section 62).
Information disclosure	'… right of access to any information held by the State … in so far as the information is required in the interests of public accountability' (Section 62).
Citizen Participation	People to be involved in the formulation of development plans and programs that affect them (Section 13.2).
Principles of Public Administration and Leadership	Public officials to respond to people's needs within a reasonable time, public participation in public policy making, public administration accountability to people and the dissemination of timely, accessible and accurate information by public institutions to people (Section 194).
Law Reform	The Local Authorities Bill and Provincial and Metropolitan Councils Administration Bill to effect devolution of powers and functions to local and provincial government.

Source: Adapted from GoZ (2013a).

Succession politics in the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) is characterized by public battles, with intimidation and violence a disquieting feature (ICG, 2014, p.1). Further, Zimbabwe's political and economic institutions have been criticized as non-inclusive and extractive through 'cementing the power of those who benefit from extraction' (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013, p.372). At local authority level, this has translated into polarization and politicization of the governance of local authorities and service delivery. Moreover, the politics of the control of local authorities between MDC and Zanu-PF through recentralization of power, parallel party structures and other unorthodox means continues unabated (McGregor, 2013; Muchadenyika, 2015c).

4.3 | Legal and policy environment

Zimbabwe's Constitution sets the framework for an expansive social accountability agenda. This is despite the presence of numerous and diverse impediments dominating culture and practice of citizen–state accountability relationships. The local government law reform underway is not promising, as the process is struggling to embrace new governance principles ushered by the new Constitution. In particular, the implementation of devolution faces major hurdles as Zanu-PF, the ruling party, sees devolution as a threat to its hold on power (Muchadenyika, 2015b). Regrettably, 'centralisation will continue if the new [local government] laws do not sufficiently operationalise the new Constitution' (Chatiza & Chakaipa, 2014). Without local government legislation that sufficiently builds and elaborates on Constitutional provisions promoting social accountability, accountability mechanisms between local authorities and citizens will remain weak.

At policy level, the government economic plan, Zim Asset, focuses on government reinvention to improve general administration, governance as well as performance management (GoZ, 2013b, p.118). Of particular note is the public administration, governance and performance management sub-cluster which prioritizes public sector transparency and accountability. Such accountability focus provides an opportunity for civil society when engaging with central and local government.

Further, government introduced Results Based Management which has resulted in the formulation of performance-based contracts for senior local authority executives. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of Results Based Management in local authorities is still hard to discern as the implementation framework seems to be not well-thought out and co-ordinated.

5 | CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES: PROMOTING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The July 31 elections in 2013 in Zimbabwe ushered in a renewed period of political domination by Zanu-PF (Raftopoulos, 2013). MDC control of local government fell drastically. This background coincided with new methods of holding local authorities to account. In this regard, the focus of civil society interventions turned to promoting social accountability. This article therefore examines attempts by seven civil society organizations to promote social accountability initiatives in seven local authorities.[3] These local authorities are Bindura, Bulawayo, Harare, Makoni, Nyanga, Masvingo and Mutoko. In some way, these local authorities are involved in various citizen engagement processes, primarily driven by local government law.

5.1 | Existing local authority–citizen engagement processes

Local authorities–citizen engagement processes are mainly premised on budgeting and development planning (summarized in Table 2). In Zimbabwe, development planning is undertaken through planning and development structures from the village to national level (Mutizwa-Mangiza, 1991). The

TABLE 2 Local Authority–Citizen Engagement Processes and Mechanisms

Local Authority	Engagement Processes	Engagement Mechanisms
Mutoko Rural	Participatory Budgeting, Gender Budgeting.	Councillor Ward Meetings, Development planning structures.
Bindura Urban	Budgeting.	Councillor Ward Meetings, Residents Associations, Complaints register, Toll free & SMS Platforms.
Makoni Rural	Budgeting, Development planning.	Development planning structures, Ward plough backs[a], Women Revolving Fund[b].
Nyanga Rural	Budgeting, Development Planning.	Councillor Ward Meetings, Development planning structures.
Masvingo Urban	Budgeting.	Residents Associations, Councillor Ward Meetings.
Bulawayo Urban	Budgeting.	Call Centre, Councillor Ward Meetings, Residents Associations.
Harare Urban	Budgeting, Slum Upgrading, Participatory Urban Planning.	Residents Associations, Councillor Ward Meetings, Homeless Federations.

Source: The Author.

[a]Makoni Rural Local Authority gives 30% of revenue collected per Ward to support Ward-based development initiatives. This has prompted residents to pay levies. Each Ward has a separate ledger account at the local authority's Treasurer and the account is open for public view and scrutiny.

[b]The Rural Local Authority (RLA) gives initial start-up capital of $500 US dollars that is payable after five months at an interest rate of 2% for a group of 10 women. This programme is still at the piloting stage and 10 wards have been covered.

[3]These organizations have deliberately been left unidentified.

main mechanisms of engagement are ward councillor meetings, residents' associations and development planning structures (ward development and village development committees).

In most instances, local authorities and citizens are not engaging effectively (Development Impact Consultancy, 2013). In general, engagement processes and mechanisms presented in Table 2 are weak and largely not functional. This has two explanations. First, it would seem that local authorities are engaging with citizens as a formality and not as a governance culture. Second, the existence of weak civil society and citizens' coalitions which have not capitalized on existing engagement mechanisms. At the same time, civil society is still struggling to get out of the usual pattern of contestation and antagonism with the state (Helliker, 2012). Development planning structures are weak, convening irregularly; though when they convene, they discuss development planning issues. However, their major handicap is the transformation of developed development plans into budgeted and implemented plans.

Participatory and gender budgeting has recorded considerable success in Mutoko Rural Local Authority (RLA) (Chaeruka & Sigauke, 2007). However, budget consultations by local authorities are a rubber-stamping process and not practised as a social accountability process. Slum upgrading and participatory urban planning is fostering inclusive municipal governance in Harare, with the local authority interfacing and partnering with poor communities in the provision of urban services (in particular water, sanitation, tenure security and road infrastructure) (Muchadenyika, 2015a).

Councillor Ward meetings are an important mechanism of linking local authorities and citizens; though councillors often lack the critical information that citizens require. Citizen voice is normally channelled through residents' associations, which are an important platform of residents' interface with local authorities in urban areas. Despite that, residents' associations show weaknesses in governance, programming and articulation of purpose (Chatiza, Kagoro, & Ndlovu, 2013). However, residents' associations have laboured through a heavily politicized local government system and have grown to be respectable actors in local governance. In particular, residents' associations are performing three functions. These functions are confronting local authorities and pressuring them to restore delivery capability, producing those services that councils are unable or unwilling to provide, and defending residents against the predatory actions of local authorities (Musekiwa & Chatiza, 2015). As a way of accounting and promoting development in communities, Makoni RLA's 30% community plough back and the Women Revolving Fund is transforming the engagement between the local authority and its residents. Primarily this is because the two engagement mechanisms are promoting dialogue, mutual accountability and community development.

5.2 | Civil society social accountability focus areas

In an effort to promote transparency and accountability in local authorities, civil society organizations are focusing mainly on basic service delivery monitoring, community-based planning, and budgeting. There are three reasons for this. First, poor service delivery is compelling citizens and civil society engagement with local authorities as a way to improve service delivery. Second, development in local authorities is informed by development planning, a process that defines the spatial distribution of services and the built environment. Third, budgeting forms a critical process of defining priority areas for local authority financing (Coutinho, 2010). These three focus areas (service delivery, planning and finance) are the core of local authority functions as well as citizen–local authority engagement. The primary focus of civil society is building and strengthening citizen coalitions that engage local authorities in these three issues.

On basic service delivery monitoring, civil society is focusing on building citizen coalitions that engage with local authorities around the delivery of water, sanitation, health, education and transport services. Communities are developing their own community development plans which are then

TABLE 3 Civil Society Social Accountability Focus Areas

Local Authority	Focus Areas
Mutoko Rural	Gender-based budgeting; Basic service delivery monitoring.
Masvingo Urban	Budgeting, Basic service delivery monitoring.
Nyanga Rural	Community-based planning, Budgeting, Gender mainstreaming.
Bindura Urban	Basic services delivery monitoring.
Harare Urban	Basic service delivery monitoring, Budgeting.
Bulawayo Urban	Budgeting, Basic services delivery monitoring.
Makoni Rural	Community-Based Planning.

Source: The Author.

translated into local authority plans. Budgeting is through communities' participation in the budgeting process, a process envisaged to contributing to budgets that respond to the context and gender specific needs of communities. Table 3 summarizes the focus areas by civil society in seven local authorities.

The effectiveness of focus areas mentioned in Table 3 is context specific. In Masvingo, residents through their association, have compelled the municipality to consult residents on civic affairs. This relationship has allowed citizens to speak through a consolidated and focused voice; with the local authority prioritizing engaging residents through Masvingo United Residents and Ratepayers Association. In Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, residents through their association (Bulawayo Progressive Residents Association) have transformed how they relate with the local authority. In particular, engagement is through dialogue platforms, demonstrations and petitions. Both the city and residents' associations emphasize mutual engagement in civic affairs. Between 2013 and 2015, residents and civil society coalitions successfully blocked the city's pre-paid water meter project in a predominantly poor suburb, Cowdray Park.[4]

The Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA) which operates in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, contests the legitimacy of the imposed authority, representing citizen views on budgetary processes, and contesting the transfer of local authority functions to government parastatals (Kamete, 2009). Over the years, the association has waged heavily politicized struggles, with tangible outcomes and impacts on citizen participation in local governance affairs. The city of Harare conducted its first budget performance review in more than 10 years; a development also attributed to CHRA's independent budget-monitoring process.

Residents' associations have been promoting social accountability for a long time, since it is their core mandate. This is evidenced in the results of their work. However, other civil society organizations, whose core work is not engaging with local authorities, are struggling. Social accountability is a new phenomenon to these organizations, entailing a learning process that requires capacity building in relationships as well as coalition building. Further, residents' associations as urban social movements have largely been successful in promoting social accountability, mainly due to an approach combining militancy alongside a critical mass of a differentiated membership. Such approaches are proving to be vital in a country ruled by an authoritarian regime bent on holding power and surviving rather than service delivery.

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[4]The issue of pre-paid water meters is still being fiercely contested, with government and local authorities pressing for them while residents and their associations are resisting such a move. The main argument of residents is that the Constitution of Zimbabwe through Section 77 provides that every person has the right to water, and hence pre-paid water meters will violate that right.

TABLE 4 Social Accountability Tools

Tool	Effectiveness
Community Scorecards[a]	In Masvingo, this has facilitated residents' feedback without victimization fears. In Nyanga, communities are suspicious of reprisals from politicians, and government officials.
Service delivery satisfaction surveys	Assisted in determining the extent to which residents are satisfied or dissatisfied with the delivery of major services (health, water, electricity and education).
Social Service charters	Local Authorities that were engaged are willing to adopt social service charters despite resistance from the local government ministry. Bulawayo managed to adopt a service charter.
Sensitization meetings	Have raised consciousness among young women on their rights and the need to demand for their fulfilment where gaps exist.
Stakeholder surveys	Helped to understand the power, positions and perspective of different stakeholders on how they influence the outcome of policy processes.
Petitions	Local authorities do not always respond. If they do respond they will be informing residents that there are no funds.
Local evidence generation groups	These generate evidence on advocacy and lobby issues.

Source: Adapted from Chatiza, Muchadenyika, and Matumbike (2014, p. 27).

[a]The community scorecard focused on water, refuse collection, council clinics, roads and housing stands.

5.3 | Social accountability tools in practice

In practice, the main social accountability tools are community scorecards, service delivery satisfaction surveys, social service charters, sensitization meetings and petitions. These tools are facilitating citizen–local authority engagement, with citizens imposing accountability on local authorities. In Masvingo, community scorecards are facilitating citizen feedback on service delivery without fears of victimization, while in Nyanga, the effectiveness of citizen scorecards is limited due to suspicion and scepticism by citizens fearing backlash and reprisals from elected leaders, government officials and frontline service professionals. Table 4 summarizes the effectiveness of social accountability tools in practice.

The effectiveness of social accountability tools mentioned in Table 4 is underpinned by three factors; namely political will, local political dynamics and civil society approach. Central government, through the local government ministry, has often exhibited bureaucratic tendencies forestalling civil society–local authority engagement. Local politicians have threatened citizen coalitions and civil society engaged in demanding accountability. On the other hand, some civil society organizations show weak approaches when engaging local authorities.

5.4 | Emerging social accountability issues

While civil society organizations are focusing on specific issues of basic service delivery monitoring, community-based planning and budgeting, residents in the seven local authorities point to emerging priority issues. These relate to direct citizen engagement with local authority staff, auditing, pro-poor service delivery (in particular on vendor licensing and management, and low-income housing), structured councillor-feedback meetings and participatory budgeting. These citizen aspirations revolve around 'a council-citizen dynamic at the centre of local government development and service

delivery' (MLGPWNH, 2013). However, in practice, the levers of power in controlling the operations of local authorities are under the control of a powerful and often destabilizing central government (through the local government ministry).

Citizens in their collective action structures prefer the 'short route' of accountability linking them directly with local authority service professionals. This provides quick feedback and action as opposed to the conventional 'long route' (through councillors). Entrenched corruption exists in Zimbabwe's local authorities (Muchadenyika, 2014), exacerbated by the fact that there are no up-to-date independent audits in most local authorities. For instance, in Harare, the city lost 7.2 million US dollars in 2012 due to fraudulent activities by council officials (Auditor-General, 2014, p.vii). Therefore, it can be argued that focusing on citizen-centred audits is an important way of making sure that local authorities account for revenue and expenditure.

Zimbabwe's economy is largely informal, with formal unemployment estimated officially at over 90% (Hammar, McGregor & Landau, 2010, p.271). However, local authorities are still using development control regulations and bylaws crafted during the formal economy. In particular, these regulations are stifling the livelihoods of urban residents, as local authorities are criminalizing vending and people-initiated housing schemes. In urban areas, basing social accountability initiatives on pro-poor service delivery assists in building the resilience of the urban poor who constitute the majority in Zimbabwe's urban areas. Scaling up participatory budgeting, as opposed to the statutory requirements of budget consultations, promotes active and responsible citizenship and responsive local authorities.

6 | CIVIL SOCIETY CONSTRAINTS AND PROSPECTS

Accountability is not an apolitical project (Newell & Wheeler, 2006, p.2). Accountability work meddles in deeply contested political terrains. As such, the major challenges facing civil society promoting social accountability relate to political resistance, resistance to change by bureaucrats and teetering civil society. Despite that, the willingness of citizens across the political divide and government-led pro-accountability programmes are important resources for civil society.

6.1 | Political resistance

Zimbabwe's political system treats with scepticism, and sometimes with brutality, civil society organizations promoting issues of accountability, transparency and citizen participation in civic affairs. As such, restrictive laws like the Public Order and Security Act and Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act are often used and abused by the state apparatus to curtail the work of civil society. Further, civil society is operating in an environment characterized by political polarization among citizens, dominance of one political party, resistance from grassroots political structures, and the perception of politicians that social accountability is a threat to their hold on power. The political environment is authoritarian—a situation that negates and sometimes criminalizes active citizenship. In such a political context, 'the struggle for access to information becomes a pre-condition for any initiative oriented at controlling government behaviour' (Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2002, p.226). Information about how local authorities function is an important 'weapon' that civil society is striving to get hold of along with evidence-based initiatives.

Despite this, Zimbabwe's Constitution provides an enabling framework that counters an inhibiting political environment. Basing social accountability work on Constitutional provisions lessens the harshness of the political factors. In particular, prospects revolve around promoting devolution of powers and functions to local authorities, compelling local authorities to disclose vital information in

the interest of public accountability and transparency, organizing citizens to demonstrate and petition local authorities, and building citizen coalitions for participation in civic affairs. These become the fundamental foundations of social accountability initiatives.

6.2 | Resistance to change

In general, local authorities are managed by a bureaucracy that is resistant to new ideas; preferring to run local affairs by its rule book. Most of the bureaucrats were appointed at the height of political contestation between Zanu-PF and MDC, with issues of merit being superseded by political allegiance. Further, public officials are corrupt, seldom held accountable for their performance and succumb to incentives to delay services in order to extract bribes (Naing, 2012). The transition from local government to local governance is still in its infancy, making it difficult to introduce reforms aimed at citizen and civil society participation and broad-based governance (transparency and accountability, etc.). Local authorities have become a mere façade, with Zanu-PF structures maintaining partisan control, while also trying to maintain legitimacy through a normative commitment to the law, professional delivery of services and the general good (McGregor, 2013). Such a context makes civil society work problematic.

However, opportunities to institutionalize social accountability in local authorities do exist. First, through supporting initiatives that promote accountable governance and performance management in local authorities. The Government of Zimbabwe through Zim Asset aims to ensure that 'governance systems are people friendly, by providing high quality services to the citizens in an efficient and effective manner' (GoZ, 2013b, p.118). Accordingly, public sector accountability and transparency is one of the key result areas of government, something civil society can seize and capitalize on. Further, despite capacity constraints, government is implementing a Results Based Management system, which civil society can help institutionalize in local authorities. Such a system is vital in making sure that local authorities deliver on tangible results, such as the delivery of services in terms of quality, pricing and reach.

6.3 | Civil society capacity

Zimbabwe's local government system is highly formal, thus one has to know how the system operates, along with the underlying legislation and Constitutional powers and limits. Yet, most civil society organizations do not possess a comprehensive understanding of the local government system. In fact, there are elements of 'civil society failure' in Zimbabwe. That is, social contexts with limited capacity for autonomous, pro-accountability collective action (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Fox, 2015). In particular, local authorities often use the formality of the system to dispel civil society initiatives. The impact and success of civil society-led social accountability initiatives, depends to a large extent on civil society capacity in research and evidence generation, community capacity building, information dissemination and acting on defined issues (Chatiza, Muchadenyika, & Matumbike, 2014). These four areas are vital for civil society to be able to engage with both citizens and local authorities.

6.4 | Building citizen capacity and coalitions

Collective action is crucial in addressing 'situations where the state has proved consistently unresponsive to the needs of its citizens' (Kabeer, 2005, p.23). Building citizen capacity and coalitions to demand accountability is critical. Such capacity is important in enabling the poor to monitor and

discipline service providers (World Bank, 2003). Organizing citizens into formal and informal structures consolidates and amplifies citizen voice when negotiating with local authorities. Co-ordination and communication are vital aspects of sustaining collective action (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). In urban areas, citizen voices are organized through residents' associations. However, in rural areas, there are no organized structures through which citizens can channel their voices other than political party structures. This makes working in rural areas highly political, as political parties claim 'ownership' of community members. Despite that, service delivery matters are overarching and draw the attention of citizens from various political persuasions. As such, social accountability requires impartiality of civil society when engaging with communities.

7 | CONCLUSION

Based on available evidence, it would seem that civil society-led social accountability initiatives can steer service delivery performance. This is supported by significant changes in service delivery in terms of quality and quantity by local authorities. However, it should be mentioned that such civil society initiatives resulted in a surge in demand for services by citizens in the face of constrained supply from local authorities. On the other hand, the impact of civil society social accountability initiatives on service delivery reforms is insignificant. This is explained by primarily two reasons. First, the impact of civil society initiatives could be seen over a long period of sustained social accountability work. Second, the government and local authorities have prioritized government-led as opposed to civil society-led social accountability initiatives.

A central argument of this article is that civil society-led social accountability initiatives are effective under conditions of civil society capacity, institutionalization of social accountability by local authorities and negotiating local political dynamics. The capacity assessment findings of selected civil society organizations indicated the importance of research and evidence generation, community capacity building, information dissemination and acting on defined issues as the bedrock of social accountability initiatives. Furthermore, it can be argued that the impacts of social accountability are widespread when local authorities institutionalize social accountability mechanisms. Accountability intervenes in deeply contested politics; hence, the ability to negotiate local political dynamics becomes fundamental.

While social accountability initiatives in local governance are promoting active and responsible citizenship, the critical challenge is to reform Zimbabwe's local government with the aim of yielding pro-poor and social justice outcomes. Pro-poor and social justice largely because Zimbabwe is a country in a prolonged crisis in which service delivery is 'commodified' at the expense of meeting Constitutional obligations. Invariably, the poor and marginalized groups of society, in particular, young people, children and women suffer from such a service delivery approach. Attempts at strengthening citizen–local authority engagement are foiled by a powerful and authoritarian central government bent on control rather than devolving power to local authorities. However, the current civil society focus on citizen–local authority engagement creates opportunities for entrenching and deepening citizen participation, democracy and good governance.

It can be argued that promoting government-led social accountability initiatives while gradually introducing civil society approaches often reduces resistance to change. At the same time, such an approach builds the recognition of civil society work by government agencies. The Zimbabwe Government, at least on paper, is pursuing a number of initiatives aimed at promoting social accountability. Thus, the role of civil society becomes promoting the institutionalization of such initiatives at the local and state level.

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