



# Zimbabwe's transition to a devolved system of government: Critical factors for success



## Authors:

Tawanda Nyikadzino<sup>1</sup> Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

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## Corresponding author:

Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad,  
svyas-doorgapersad@uj.ac.za

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**Background:** The national development roadmap of the Zimbabwean government emphasises devolution as a fundamental plank in alleviating poverty and regional inequalities. However, the government is grappling with the transition to a devolved government system.

**Aim:** This article aimed to explore the critical success factors for guiding the devolution process in Zimbabwe.

**Setting:** The research is descriptive in nature and provides a detailed analysis of the devolution processes in Zimbabwe.

**Methods:** The article is theoretical, and considered a qualitative, descriptive research approach.

**Results:** The article argues that devolution has the potential to achieve the intended benefits if implementation fundamentals are in place.

**Conclusion:** The article provides the political, fiscal, legislative, and institutional reforms critical for the successful implementation of devolution. These reforms are complementary and mutually reinforcing in facilitating the transition to a devolved government system.

**Keywords:** decentralisation; devolution; multilevel governance; intergovernmental relations; local governance; Zimbabwe.

## Introduction

Since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has implemented successive decentralisation reforms aimed at improving the visibility of the government. The decentralisation reforms, however, were skewed in favour of deconcentration with very little effort to transfer fiscal, personnel and decision-making powers to subnational governments (Chigwata, Muchapondwa & DeVisser 2017). As a result, the nature of decentralisation that was pursued strengthened central government control to the detriment of sound local governance. As is the case in Botswana, there was no constitutional protection of local governments. The extant local government statutes, namely the *Urban Councils Acts* of 1995, *Rural District Councils Act* of 1988, *Provincial Councils and Administration Act* of 1985 and the *Traditional Leaders Act* of 1998, gave the minister responsible for local government unfettered fiscal, political and administrative powers to micro-manage local governments (Madhekeni & Zhou 2012).

Although the preceding Acts were good, they largely depended on the will and commitment of the minister responsible for local governance to an extent that the quality of the minister determined the quality of local governance. Executive powers and functions were vested in the hands of the President and the Minister of Local Government – a situation that reduced subnational governments to mere implementing agencies of the centre (Jonga & Chirisa 2009). The central government further strengthened centralisation strategies in the 2000s, to control opposition-dominated urban councils (Muchadenyika & William 2018). Hyper centralisation of power brewed frustration among subnational governments as they were denied any meaningful decision space to govern in their own initiatives.

The article utilised a qualitative research approach that 'helps in exploring and understanding in depth the meanings that people ascribe to a phenomenon' (Neuman 2014:167). Documentary review, a technique mainly used to analyse official documents, was used for data collection purposes. According to Mogalakwe (2006:221), documentary review entails 'the analysis of documents that contain information about the phenomenon one wishes to study'. The researchers used qualitative content analysis to identify recurrent devolution implementation pillars. For

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the purpose of this article, the multi-level governance (MLG) theory is considered suitable as a framework. Marks (1993) defines MLG as a system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers, which are supranational, national, regional, and local. Schmitter (2004) views it as a binding decision-making arrangement that involves a multiplicity of independent but interdependent actors (public and private) from different levels. From these definitions, it can be concluded that the MLG theory acknowledges the importance of both public and private actors in the policymaking process. The theory also involves the upward, downward, and sideways dispersion of power and authority. Hooghe and Marks (2003) acknowledge the involvement of several tiers of government in the decision-making process and advocate for the sharing of decision-making powers among multiple levels (supranational, national, and subnational levels).

The MLG theory, as argued by Awesti (2007), emphasises the cooperation of subnational governments and interconnected relationships among different spheres of government. Dispersion of authority across multiple spheres of government is regarded as more efficient than the centralisation of power. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the state is no longer an important actor in policymaking and implementation. The theory justifies the inclusion of devolution in the Constitution of Zimbabwe (CoZ) of 2013. A devolved system of government is thus regarded as the best form of governance. In addition, the strength of the MLG theory, as indicated by Schmitter (2004), is based on its capability to broaden the theoretical lens in political science to include all different governmental levels in decision making. Hooghe and Marks (2004) summarise the benefits of the MLG theory as follows: more devolved entities can handle better heterogeneity among citizens' preferences, and multiple jurisdictions enhance high commitment to policy processes.

## Conceptual framework on devolution

Devolution, as cited by Vyas-Doorgapersad (2012:131), is whereby 'the transfer of governance responsibility for specified functions to sub-national levels, either publicly or privately owned, are largely outside the direct control of the central government'. Devolution involves the sharing of the management of public affairs of a country among the different tiers of government in such a way that the lower tiers are granted reasonable scope to raise funds and use resources in the provision of a range of services that contribute towards the enhancement of the welfare of the residents (Asaju 2010). Therefore, the devolution of governmental powers and authority ensures the recognition of local governments as legitimate and autonomous institutions and strengthens their capacity as problem-solving grassroots governments (Odigbo 2013). The preceding conceptualisation of devolution highlights the three main dimensions of devolution (political, administrative, and fiscal) that guide the designs of

devolution reforms across the globe. Devolution reforms progress under conditions where a delicate balance in implementing political, administrative, and fiscal reforms exists. Emphasis on one neglecting the other dimension risk compromising the potential of devolution.

A prominent argument raised in favour of devolution is that it enhances local democracy. The argument is based on the fact that the devolution of powers and functions to local governments, which are closer to the people compared to the distant central government, enhances citizen participation and brings together different stakeholders, thereby increasing social cohesion and collaboration (Steiner 2006).

It is argued that local governments are an effective training ground for democracy (Asaju 2010). Devolution is also viewed as a desirable reform for enhancing allocative efficiency in the supply of public goods and services. In this regard, as Siddle and Koelble (2012:36) illustrate, devolution accords with the federalism theory which argues that 'centralised governments are incapable of achieving the differentiation necessary to cater for the diverse needs and preferences of heterogeneous communities'. Local governments, due to their proximity to the people, are better positioned to identify and address heterogeneous needs.

## Devolution in Zimbabwe

The concentration of powers at the centre, strengthened by the deeply embedded one-centre-of-power ideology, had serious negative implications on service delivery, innovation and creativity at lower levels (Muchadenyika & Williams 2018). Over-centralisation of governing powers and functions further created an obese central government that struggled to shoulder the needs of all the provinces and local authorities. This supports Ndue's (1999) observation that, because of centralisation, bureaucracy outgrew its competencies by far and the state became an unmanageable giant with clay feet. The highly centralised governance system generated administrative pathologies, including communication overload, slow response times, filtering and distortion of information, and a failure to grasp spatial connections in sectoral programming (Economic Commission for Africa 2003). People's dissatisfaction with the centralised, unaccountable, inefficient, unresponsive, and autocratic central government paved the way for the idea of devolution to appeal to a variety of stakeholders. Thus, local government practitioners wrestled for devolution so that localities can be empowered to manage their own affairs with minimal central government involvement (Masunungure & Ndoma 2013).

As De Visser (2005:18) aptly notes, 'by its expansion and its unbridled assumption of responsibilities for all and sundry, the centralised state signed its death warrant' as it was overtaken by an avalanche of problems. It created 'democratic centralism' where citizens are able to participate in elections, for example, but with a centralism of decision-making that those citizens were expected to support whether or not the decisions made were in their best interests (Hope 2014:347).

This democratic centralism decimated citizen participation in the governance process and as a result local people felt treated like subjects rather than citizens.

The centralised governance approach also resulted in the marginalisation of other provinces. Although the marginalisation argument is highly contentious, there is a general perception that some regions, like the Matabeleland region, have been economically, politically, and socially marginalised by the central government since independence (Dube 2017). In support of this argument, Dube (2017) notes that 'it defies virtue of logic that a fully resourced and self-reliant region operates under the mercy of the centralised administration'. Mhlanga (2012:206) views this as a 'northern problem' – a metaphor that refers to the existence of a disgruntled group that claims a particular history and particular identity that differs from that of the dominant ethnic group who tended to benefit more from the state. Thus, devolution calls were triggered by government policies that tend to favour Mashonaland, a region dominated by the ruling ethnic group, at the expense of other regions of the country (Mhlanga 2012).

Provinces that strongly advocated for devolution during the constitution-making process (Matabeleland, Midlands, and Manicaland) have long blamed their under-developed public and social infrastructure on the deliberate policy of marginalisation by the central government that favours other provinces for political expediency (Moyo & Ncube 2014). It is therefore evident that the sour taste in people's mouths concerning the issue of one centre of power, which is open to abuse, catalysed devolution calls in Zimbabwe. Devolution advocates were demanding for the transfer of governing power to people in the localities who are more intimate with the desires of the local people (Masunungure & Ndoma 2013). In this context, devolution has become critical in the quest to bring the government closer to the governed.

The marginalisation debate was accompanied by the need to ensure vertical and horizontal equitable distribution of national resources. In Zimbabwe, as is the case in other African countries, the central government possesses lucrative sources of revenue and some provinces have more resource endowments, resulting in fiscal imbalances (Marumahoko & Fessha 2011). The transfer of unfunded mandates that characterised Zimbabwe's decentralisation trajectory since independence fiscally stressed local authorities. Due to constrained local revenue generation capacity, local governments were forced to rely on central government transfers, a facility at the disposal of the centre to further control the former. Although intergovernmental grants were important sources of finance, their implementation was shrouded with transparency and accountability problems (Coutinho 2010). The central government enjoyed unfettered powers in determining who gets what, when and how much.

Consequently, intergovernmental transfers were channelled towards centrally decided programmes thereby forcing local

governments to be upwardly accountable to the centre at the expense of the locals (Marumahoko & Fessha 2011). In the absence of constitutional provisions and regulation, 'intergovernmental grants were vulnerable to political machinations' (Rensnick 2022). As a result, transfers to opposition-controlled urban councils became a favour rather than an obligation. Against the foregoing challenge, devolution was viewed as a way of correcting imbalances in regional resource distribution patterns (Mhlanga 2012).

Given the evidence in the literature on the works of governance challenges experienced in Zimbabwe (Jonga & Chirisa 2009; Madhekeni & Zhou 2012), devolution implementation is imperative. However, the question of how to properly design and effectively implement devolution against the background of political contestations becomes critical in Zimbabwe. As emphasised by Chigwata (2019:3), the design of a devolved government system should respond to contextual and pragmatic demands. Using documentary analysis, this article discusses key factors for improving the implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe.

## Critical factors for the successful implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe

Experiences have shown that the performance of devolutionary reforms is a reflection of the implementers' commitment to creating conducive and firm implementation conditions. If implemented without the right ingredients, devolution struggles to achieve the desired results and, in some instances results in a worse off scenario. Against the preceding argument, guided by the political, fiscal, and administrative dimensions of devolution, this section provides a detailed account of the following critical factors for the successful implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe.

### The enactment of devolution laws

As Fombad (2016) observed, because a constitution is not a self-enforcing piece of legislation and is usually couched in broad terms, it leaves details concerning institutions and the laws regulating these institutions and other matters for subsequent regulation. As is the case in South Africa and Kenya (Ghai 2015), the constitutional provisions on devolution should be explicitly supported by legislation. The Act, which will be a central part of the devolution endeavour, should demand the devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities to provincial and local governments. As suggested by the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ECLSG) (1985) in Article 4(1), national legislation, and ideally the constitution, should determine how subnational governments are established, the nature of their powers, the scope of their authority, and their functions.

It is also imperative that local governments should be given wide-ranging powers and be made the highest decision-making authorities in their respective areas of jurisdiction.

They should have political autonomy and final decision-making powers concerning their devolved functions (ECLSG 1985). The African Charter on Decentralisation (ACD) (2014) suggests:

[L]ocal governments should, in accordance with national law, have the powers to, in an accountable and transparent manner, manage their administration and finances through democratically elected deliberative assemblies and executive organs. (Article 5)

An Act on devolution should therefore clearly define the jurisdictional scope of subnational governments and protect them from undue central government involvement. In fact, after implementing devolution, the role of the central government should be limited to only setting the operational framework within which local governments undertake their day-to-day responsibilities (Bosire 2015). The central government should only make local decisions in cases where local governments could have failed to make decisions.

In tandem, the ECLSG (1985) Article 11 stipulates that local governments should be granted the right of recourse to judicial remedy to guarantee autonomous use of devolved powers and respect for self-governance, as enshrined in the domestic laws. This is a critical component of any devolution reform as the involvement and interference of central government officials can significantly undermine the potential of devolution. As is the case in Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa, an Act on devolution should give subnational governments both legislative and executive powers so that they can enjoy autonomy in formulating both long- and short-term development plans consistent with local preferences, raising revenue, and formulating, approving, and implementing their own budgets (Bosire 2015).

## Fiscal devolution

Omitting or delaying fiscal devolution often renders other dimensions of devolution ineffective. Subnational governments 'should have adequate financial resources to fulfil their mandates and ensure significant autonomy in resource allocation' (Commonwealth Local Government Forum [CLGF] 2005). It will be difficult for subnational governments to shoulder the devolved responsibilities if there is a mismatch between financial resources and responsibilities. Chigwata (2019) rightfully points out that devolution is more than just transferring responsibilities to lower tiers; it also involves devolving fiscal resources for spearheading people-centred local development. In Mitchinson's (2003) view, it is of essence that the transfer of a service responsibility is accompanied by the simultaneous transfer of equivalent funds, staff, and assets from the government department that was previously responsible for the service.

There ought to be a budgetary process that aligns with the devolution framework. The ECLSG 1985 Article 9(4) warns that the local financial base should be sufficiently diversified and be buoyant to enable devolved entities to cope with

service delivery financial obligations. In fact, subnational governments should be granted budgetary autonomy so that they can determine their own expenditure choices. They should have the freedom to provide services as they deem fit (Mitchinson 2003).

Taking note of the fact that the central government in Zimbabwe is in control of the most lucrative sources of revenue, locally generated revenue should be complemented through revenue-sharing or intergovernmental transfers, as provided for in the 2013 CoZ. Subnational governments themselves are unlikely to generate adequate revenue due to variations in terms of financial capacities (Tonhodzai, Nyikadzino & Nhema 2015). A balanced system of intergovernmental transfers to complement local revenue-raising efforts is therefore critical to equalise and ensure financial sustainability, influence local priorities in areas of high national but low local prioritisation, compensate benefit spillovers, and address equity concerns, especially for poor jurisdictions (Chigwata 2018). According to the CLGF (2005), in Article 10, intergovernmental transfers must be free of political bias, and a local government agreement or legal framework to govern such transfers is often of critical importance.

To facilitate the sharing of financial resources, the policymakers should consider the adoption of an independent commission in line with developments in South Africa and Kenya. These countries have established the Financial and Fiscal Commission and the Commission of Revenue Allocation, respectively, to provide advice to their parliaments on how the national cake should be shared (Steytler & Ghai 2014). Furthermore, in light of the recommendations of the ACD (2014), central government transfers should be predictable and transparent to allow subnational governments to develop their own strategic plans.

## Designing accountability mechanisms

It is important to emphasise that the fiscal devolution arrangement and devolution, in general, should come with strengthened accountability mechanisms to avoid devolution of inefficiencies and corruption. Devolution cannot be successfully implemented without proper accountability mechanisms. As it is said, 'In the absence of effective accountability mechanisms, there are dangers that decentralised resources will be improperly diverted and/or that the benefits of decentralisation will be captured by insiders' (Ribot 2004:25).

Anticipating local corruption and fiscal indiscipline, the policymakers should devise accountability mechanisms to ensure that local officials are held accountable for their actions. Corporate governance scandals and fiscal indiscipline are destroying local governments operations (Chigudu 2020). Siddle and Koelble (2012) aver that fiscal indiscipline is one of the greatest challenges faced by multi-tiered systems of government. It should be emphasised that 'decentralised political bodies can deliver services more efficiently and



more responsibly depends on adequate mechanisms for political, fiscal, and administrative accountability' (Vyas-Doorgaparsad 2012:138).

The implementation of devolution in an environment characterised by weak reporting and audit systems, as well as porous accountability systems, creates a breeding ground for financial indiscipline and corporate scandals, as it will be difficult to monitor the implementation of local programmes and the utilisation of local funds (Hope 2014). Therefore, the policymakers should prioritise the development of robust accountability systems for subnational governments to fulfil devolved responsibilities. In this regard, the parent ministry should play an influential role in supervising and setting the regulatory framework for the management of subnational governments' affairs.

Because the intention of devolution is not to create completely autonomous local government institutions (Bosire 2015), the devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities to local governments should come with the institutionalisation of supervisory mechanisms to ensure that local governments operate within the framework provided in the Constitution and other relevant Acts of Parliament. Central government supervision is an indispensable accountability mechanism for the effective implementation of devolution (Chigwata 2018).

As suggested by the ECLSG (1985) Article 8(2), any supervision of devolved entities should comply with the letter and spirit of devolution and be enshrined in governing laws. In the current context of vertically divided authority in Zimbabwe, the provision for central government supervision of local governments without the necessary safeguards in the form of checks and balances might choke subnational authorities, especially those under the control of opposition parties.

## Regulation of intergovernmental relations

Clarity on the relationship between the centre and devolved structures is critical. The relationship between central government organs and subnational governments should be further clarified and improved upon. Because conflicts between the different tiers in a devolved system of government are inevitable (Ghai 2015), there must be mechanisms to regulate intergovernmental relations. The central government should create enabling conditions for cooperation and coordination between national and subnational governments (ACD 2014 Article 6(2)). This can be done through the introduction of both internal and external conflict-resolution mechanisms. However, parties involved should exhaust internal remedies first before approaching the courts, and other external remedies.

Policymakers in Zimbabwe can draw lessons from experiences in Kenya and South Africa. In Kenya and South Africa, the framework for intergovernmental relations is provided for in their constitutions. The Constitution of South

Africa, 1996 dedicated a whole chapter (Chapter 3) to cooperative government principles. Article 189 of the Kenyan Constitution, 2010 is exclusively dedicated to the principles of intergovernmental consultation and cooperation. It provides specific principles that guide and regulate intergovernmental relations. The policymakers should therefore consider developing and adopting similar Acts to regulate intergovernmental relations.

Additionally, there should be an institution playing a balancing act between the central and subnational governments. The institution should control the central government when acting against the principles of devolution, and subnational governments when acting *ultra vires*. It should deal with both the centrifugal and centripetal forces. In South Africa, for instance, the National Council of Provinces helps to ensure that the system of decentralised government is able to work effectively (Mafilika 2013). It represents provincial interests and ensures that provincial issues are taken into account in the national sphere of government (Ghai 2015). The National Council of Provinces also plays an important role in resolving disputes between the national and provincial governments. Considering the power politics and historical differences between the different political parties in Zimbabwe regarding the type of devolution to adopt, the devolution of governmental powers to subnational governments is likely to create conflict and confusion.

There should be partnerships, coordination, and cooperation among the three tiers of government. As argued by Chigwata (2019), the design of devolution will be incomplete without the development modalities to facilitate both vertical and horizontal collaboration between and among the devolved units and the central government. Ghai (2015) emphasises that, after the devolution of powers and responsibilities, it is crucial to ensure that the different tiers of government will not work independently. The activities of all the tiers of government should be strategically integrated both vertically and horizontally to satisfy the needs and expectations of the people. There should be complementarities and harmonious relations for devolution to achieve the intended goals.

According to the CLGF (2005), meaningful devolution requires strengthened cooperation and coordination between the centre and subnational governments. There is a need to end the cat-and-mouse relationships that have characterised centre-local relations in Zimbabwe since independence. Rather than making and imposing unilateral decisions, the central government should consult subnational governments before making decisions that affect the latter. In this regard, the issuance of coercive central government directives should be minimised. As suggested by the ACD (2014) in Article 5, the central government should consult subnational governments through clearly defined regulations on national or subnational legal instruments, sectoral policies, programmes, or projects that directly or indirectly affect their competencies to impact the lives of local populations.

## Capacity building and development

The most daunting challenge that faces devolution as a framework for service delivery is a lack of capacity and personnel at subnational government level to exercise responsibility for service delivery (Muriisa 2008). Capacity building is defined by UNDP 'as the creation of an enabling environment with appropriate policy and legal frameworks' (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2010:45).

However, in the initial stages, because of the additional policy formulation and implementation responsibilities, devolution can amplify local capacity constraints (Siddle & Koelble 2012). Therefore, the effective and sustainable implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe will only be guaranteed if the requisite capacity to exercise devolved powers and responsibilities is prioritised and developed.

Devolution transfers a significant portion of central government functions to lower levels and should therefore be accompanied by relevant capacity-enhancement initiatives. As Hope (2014) observes, managing and sustaining decentralised governance for effective delivery of services require adequate capacity in institutions, networks, organisational structures, facilities and equipment, human resources, as well as data and information. Similarly, Steytler and Ghai (2014) indicate that devolution requires concerted capacity building efforts by the national government at the very outset.

Devolution should come with extensive capacity strengthening and training of political and administrative personnel at both the national and subnational government levels. Local authorities should be supported by other spheres of government in the development of their administrative, technical, and managerial capacities, and of their structures, which must be responsive, transparent, and accountable (United Nations Human Settlements Programme [UN Habitat] 2009). Subnational governments should have the required human, financial, and technological resources to discharge their responsibilities effectively and efficiently (ACD 2014 Article 16(2a)). There is also a need for training and retraining of local government officials, including elected councillors, so that they can understand and be in a position to deal with devolution. This statement is substantiated by Van Dijk and Croucamp (2007:667) stating that, 'without appropriate skilled and qualified staff, municipalities will be unable to meet the standards prescribed for financial and performance management'. As further pointed out by the Commonwealth Principles on Good Practice for Local Democracy and Good Governance in Article 12, it is important to strengthen and build the capacity of councillors, officers, and local governance institutions to ensure that local democracy can enable local government to deliver quality services to the local community.

In concurrence, Siddle and Koelble (2012) note that:

[T]he shifting of responsibilities of local government from purely implementing policy to both formulating and implementing policy demands a wider range of skills and experience, which

local politicians and bureaucrats may be lacking and have to develop. (p. 52)

The training programmes should mainly focus on effecting attitude change on the part of both political and administrative leaders, so that they can be progressive leaders who prioritise local development.

Because councillors under a devolved system of government are the ones responsible for making lasting decisions that might be difficult to reverse, they need to be trained through both short-term and medium-term engagements for them to make decisions that are good for the community. Vyas-Doorgapersad (2012:133) citing Ribot (2004:26) aptly captures the significance of training local councillors by affirming that 'open local elections make local politicians more likely to meet felt local needs' and should therefore be capacitated 'to take strategically inclined and informed political decisions for municipal development' (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2012:133). Training for councillors and local government personnel, in general, should focus on the policy processes, public management, corporate governance, local government finance, ethical issues in public management, among others. In this regard, local governments can partner with tertiary institutions in areas of human resources capacity development. Through this nature of partnerships, the tertiary institutions may help to conduct training needs analysis to identify skills gap and areas of capacity building.

In Zimbabwe, a number of tertiary institutions provide specialised knowledge in local governance and public administration in general. For instance, the Domboshava Institute of Manpower Development offers a Diploma in Local Government Administration and another in Community Development. In addition, the Zimbabwe Institute for Public Administration and Management also offers important courses for appointed and elected government officials. Likewise, universities such as the University of Zimbabwe, Midlands State University, Africa University, Great Zimbabwe University, and National University of Science and Technology, among others, provide public administration and local governance-related programmes. The central government should therefore demonstrate high political commitment towards the building of the required capacity. A piecemeal approach to capacity building would be a recipe for disaster in the implementation of devolution.

Awareness campaigns are also equally important to raise citizens' understanding of the CoZ and devolution in particular. Because the CoZ does not define what devolution is and is not (Chigwata 2019), devolution has been defined differently, to the detriment of the citizens. Masunungure and Ndoma (2013) argue that devolution is a frequently misunderstood and sometimes deliberately distorted term. Masunungure and Ndoma attribute the confusion to the political coaching that took place during the constitution-

making process. As a result, there is a lack of common understanding of what devolution entails because the people confuse terms such as decentralisation, delegation, and deconcentration (Madhekeni 2020). This lack of understanding among the people on what devolution entails is not a healthy situation for the implementation of devolution.

There is a need for genuine and sincere clarification and public awareness of the meaning and boundaries of devolution (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad 2020). The government and civil society organisations should join hands and mutually strive to inform the people of the meaning and benefits of devolution. Increased citizen awareness and understanding of devolution may lead to increased participation, constructive cooperation, and commitment towards achieving a common goal. In Uganda, where devolution was implemented before the people fully understood what devolution was about and what their rights and duties were, the level of popular participation remained severely constrained (Steiner 2006).

### Strengthening local democracy

Experiences in multi-level systems of government show that devolution works well in contexts of strong local democracy. Democracy is one of the 'elements of good governance' (Vyas-Doorgapersad & Aktan 2017:44) and is also regarded as the foundation of local governance and should take a participatory and representative form (ACD 2014 Article 12(2)). Local democracy is indispensable for any decentralisation reform. Therefore, for the effective functioning of devolution in Zimbabwe, there is a need to create a suitable environment for citizen participation in the governance process. Participatory governance is an important objective of devolution. It allows the locals to make known their preferences and views to their leaders, who are accountable to citizens for their performance (Siddle & Koelble 2012).

For meaningful local democracy, the transition to a devolved system of government should promote political autonomy at subnational government levels (ACD 2014; ECLSG 1985). The need to promote political autonomy should place much emphasis on ensuring that local leaders are democratically elected and that local governments are inclusive (Chigwata 2018). The direct election of local government leaders is a crucial element of local self-government, which is important in designing a devolved system of government.

The ECLSG (1985) in Article 3 suggests that subnational governments headed by freely and democratically elected leaders should exercise local government rights. Similarly, the ACD Article 13(2) indicates that electoral laws should promote regular, democratic, free, fair, and transparent local government elections. To be downwardly accountable and responsive to the needs and preferences of the local people, the central government should not appoint local government officials. The involvement of the central government in the

appointment of subnational government officials forces subnational governments to be upwardly accountable to the centre, and in the process neglecting the needs of the local people.

To further strengthen local democracy and political autonomy, different political parties, including independent candidates, should be allowed to contest in local elections without any hindrance (ECLSG 1985). The participation of a variety of political formations will nurture democratic pluralism, which is an important aspect of any democratic state (Chigwata 2018). To make local elections politically significant and competitive, policymakers should consider separating local and national elections. The separation of local and national elections gives local political leaders sufficient space to operate more autonomously (Bland 2010). As succinctly pointed out by Chigwata (2018), if local elections are held at the same time as national elections, national factors will influence local voting behaviour. Moreover, the local people will focus more on political parties rather than the individual candidates. Consequently, incompetent and corrupt leaders might find their way back into office.

The enhancement of political autonomy and democratic local governance also entails inclusivity at the local government level. The devolved system of government should promote the involvement and participation of different social segments in the policy process. The process of local decision making should reflect the social, economic, environmental, and cultural needs of the entire community and ensure that the needs of the whole community are met, especially of disadvantaged groups including women, youth, minority groups, and people with disabilities, whose voices are often neglected (CLGF 2005). It is therefore important for policymakers to create special mechanisms to increase and protect the voices of the minority groups in community developmental processes.

The ACD (2014) in Article 10(3) further suggests the need for subnational governments to develop pro-poor initiatives and pay particular attention to women and the youth, as well as other vulnerable groups. Policymakers should therefore prioritise expanding the frontiers of democracy through encouraging meaningful participation of vulnerable groups in the governance of their local affairs. In this regard, the acknowledgement, institutionalisation and strengthening of the role of civil society organisations and residents' associations is critical.

### Establishment of scaffolding institutions

The implementation of devolution is a complex and daunting task as it involves fundamental changes to the architecture of government. Experiences have shown that shifting governmental powers and responsibilities from the national to subnational governments is a mammoth and daunting task (Siddle & Koelble 2012). The Government of Zimbabwe should therefore establish transitional institutions to

spearhead the processes of implementing devolution. This is important given the contestations that characterised devolution during the constitution-making process. As explained by Steiner (2006), resistance in the implementation of devolution is mainly found within the administrative structures of line ministries, as these are expected to give up part of their discretion to the benefit of subnational governments. This resistance is unavoidable in any devolution reform and should be anticipated and proactively managed through the establishment of spearheading institutions.

Devolution implementation will be very difficult if it is unclear who is spearheading the process. It is, however, important to emphasise the neutrality and independence of such institutions so that they can make decisions that are good for devolution and the people, free from political intrusion.

Concerning spearheading institutions, the policymakers in Zimbabwe need to learn from the Kenyan, South African, and Ugandan experiences. In Kenya, the Transitional Authority and the Commission on the Implementation of the Constitution were established as scaffolding institutions to oversee the implementation of devolution and the constitution in general. The Commission on Provincial Government was established in South Africa for the same purposes (Steytler & Ghai 2014).

In Uganda, the Decentralisation Secretariat was created in 1992 under the Ministry of Local Government to facilitate the implementation of decentralisation (Steiner 2006). The secretariat provided highly competent critical technical guidance in the first years of devolution. It was later dissolved in 2004 after it was realised that the Ministry of Local Government had developed the needed capacity to oversee the implementation of devolution. The transitional authorities play critical roles in coordinating and analysing the comprehensive and effective transfer of powers, functions, and assets to subnational tiers of government (Steytler & Ghai 2014). However, the established transitional authorities should operate for a defined period.

## Conclusion

Zimbabwe's post-2017 developments exemplify a bold attempt by the government to implement devolution. Devolution is touted as a strategy for addressing regional inequalities, deepening local democracy and citizen participation, and ensuring local economic growth. The article has, however, shown that devolution is a complex reform, and its success depends on how complementary fiscal, political, and administrative reforms are handled. Constitutional recognition and protection of subnational governments are, therefore, necessary, but definitely not sufficient for the transition to a functional devolved system of government. Constitutional recognition is a good point of departure, but the effective implementation of devolution is premised on other institutional, legislative, and fiscal factors.

Thus, the enactment of devolution laws, fiscal devolution, regulation of intergovernmental relations, capacity development, intergovernmental cooperation, strengthening local democracy, and the establishment of scaffolding institutions is critical for successful implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe. If the preceding fundamentals are not prioritised, devolution will remain rhetoric and developmental challenges and regional inequalities will persist. Power will remain centralised in the process undermining the operations of subnational governments. Political willingness becomes critical in setting the devolution implementation framework. Policymakers should, however, strike a delicate balance and avoid creating an array of new and unrealistic institutions, laws and systems that may choke the whole transition.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

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## Ethical considerations

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.



## Disclaimer

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