



## Role of Local Authorities and Public Officials in Encouraging Citizen Participation in Development Planning in Murewa District

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### **Abstract**

This study unpacks the role played by government authorities in stimulating citizen participation in local development. Citizen participation, being the core to sustainable development, has been of interest among development practitioners and scholars alike, with varying degrees of attention in its scope and how participation can actually occur. One of the observed trends is the critical role played by both local and national government authorities. Development planning is closely tied to citizen participation under clearly defined roles of the officials involved. The participation of citizens in local activities is not a voluntary process but a deliberate action of the authorities through various measures such as creating an environment in which everyone is equally important in contributing to change in the communities they live. The role of local and national officials has been on spotlight in developing countries, including Zimbabwe and in marginalised areas such as Murewa District of Zimbabwe. The Murewa District of Mashonaland East Province has been cited as an area in which citizen participation has remained low. The objective of this paper is to therefore examine the extent to which local authorities in Murewa District encourage citizen participation and the bottlenecks that undermine this process. Data were collected through primary data sources, including questionnaire surveys and interviews with selected local authority officials. The results of the study indicate that in Murewa District most citizens have never had the opportunity to propose policies to the council, individually or collectively as part of the local community due to the prohibitive role played by the local authorities. The study also established that citizen participation cannot be separated from the role of local and national public officials who should provide leadership and guidance to the development process and create the required democratic culture by implementing the decentralisation agenda, as stipulated in the Zimbabwe 2013 Constitution and through the adoption of participatory policy at all levels of government.

**Keywords:** *Citizen Participation; Development Planning; Local Authority; Public Officers; Murewa District; Zimbabwe*

## *Introduction*

Contemporary democratic thrust supports inclusive development in which all citizens are involved in activities that affect their lives. Zimbabwe has adopted this approach through legislative measures embedded in the 2013 Constitution. Zimbabwe adopted a people-driven constitution in 2013 which provides an elaborate system of local government under Chapter 14 (Sections 264 - 279) of the Constitution. Previously, the regular holding of local government elections and the existence of local planning legislation had been regarded and interpreted as evidence of citizen participation in local government and development planning. Muchadenyika and Williams (2016) highlight planning as intrinsically political as it imagines and reimagines a town, city or an area because there are a lot of contestations that are involved in the process. These contestations are mostly caused by power and control of resources that are dominated more in urban areas than in rural areas. Fung (2015) posits that when citizens became involved in a political process there are greater chances of them accepting decisions by political bodies and trusting political processes in general. Munyoro (2016) argues that local government is better positioned to understand and respond to the needs of citizens at the local level, as it has better contact with citizens than other tiers of government. Mapuva and Miti (2019) observed that in Zimbabwe there is a seemingly lack of political will to align local government laws with the constitution. This is notwithstanding the point that the constitution has a chapter that is dedicated to the promotion of citizen participation in development planning. Matemanda and Chinozvina (2020) argue that citizen participation tends to benefit the elites thereby disadvantaging the poor. The elites tend to manipulate the participation process to favor them, through making decisions on behalf of citizens. Du et al, (2020) cements this argument by positing that few people that participate only do so passively. Therefore, this study seeks to unravel whether Murewa District local authorities are giving citizens an opportunity in the planning and decision making process of development. The public officials in this paper are the elected councilors and appointed leaders who are not voted into position of power.

Callahan (2007) articulates that the shared belief that individuals should be given equal opportunities in the governance and development of the communities appeals to modern democratic ideals. However, regardless of the appreciation of the citizens role in development, there is a debate on how that participation can be channeled and effected. Arnstein, (2019) argue that the importance of participation by the natives in urban development as the cornerstone of democracy as citizens input is visible in final plans that are developed. This is unlike what Makumbe (2009) and Kurebwa (2015) argue, that citizens will come up with a wish list of plans that local authority will not be in a position to bankroll. These plans will later be on rolling plan listed as future developments. Different models of citizen participation have therefore been propounded leading to identification of government system as catalyst to the participation process. According to Aulich (2009), local authorities and the central government have a role to play in stimulating or dampening active participation of citizens in development. Citizen participation takes place when locals are involved in the local development planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation as opposed to being only part to small sections of the development planning process. It is about citizens getting engaged in every part of the development process (Berner, et al., 2011). This study was conducted in Murewa District of Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe and interrogated the role played by both local authorities and public officials in encouraging ordinary citizens to participate in district development planning. This study will add knowledge on citizen participation and engagement in rural areas unlike other research on citizen participation that were carried earlier by McGregor and Chatiza (2019), Matamanda and Chinozvina (2020) and Chigwena and Ndiweni (2021) that had a bias on urban areas. The objective of this study is to examine the extent to which public officials in Murewa District encourage citizen participation and the bottlenecks that undermine this process. The remaining part of this paper comprises four sections, including the literature review, methods, results and discussion, as well as the conclusion.

## **Literature**

### **Providing Leadership**

To reduce citizen distrust in local development, local authorities have a role to educate and provide leadership in the development process (Berner et al 2011). The Regional Town and Country Planning Act (RTCPA) Chapter 29:12 Section 10 highlights that the local authority shall have members that are appointed by the Minister who shall be representative of the ministry at local level. These members will have a duty and an obligation to provide leadership during the planning process at the local level. All local level plans must be in sync with the approved master plan or local plan. Local and national officials have to show great willingness to represent citizen needs and wants in their planning and prioritisation agenda. According to Kimathi (2016), local authorities must provide the knowledge and skills needed on technical issues such as budgeting and project planning to locals to encourage active and constructive participation of locals. Locals who possess technical know-how and skills and who are clear on their roles are more actively involved in the development of their communities. It is therefore pertinent that local councils and the national government provide the needed technical skills, knowledge, and vision of how development should be tackled. This is echoed by Rugo (2013) who argues that participation of citizens involves multi-views from different people with different backgrounds and thus may require some focus. It is the duty of the government then to provide that focus and direction against overall national priorities. The planning and design of meetings, workshops, and even training is the responsibility of the government. These platforms provide opportunities for citizens to express their views and even suggest priority projects and development interventions (Chikerema, 2013).

### **Creating Conducive Environment for Citizen Engagement**

The involvement of citizens in development and local government activities does not just occur spontaneously, but is a deliberate action of local authorities and the government to create platforms that inspire citizens to participate. According to Zhang & Yang (2009), city managers have a role to present a positive attitude toward citizen engagement and should do so professionally to stimulate greater citizen participation. One of the key challenges to citizen participation has been the politicisation of the development process, creating partisan development and dampening the motivation among citizens to development processes. Local authorities have a duty to create an enabling environment that foster citizen participation in their localities. This can be done through advertising planning meetings for citizens to be aware of the dates and times for the meetings. The urban councils Act (chapter 29:13) and the rural district councils Act (29:15) state that local authorities have a responsibility of making and instituting by laws in their areas of jurisdiction. These laws are the ones that can propel economic growth within an area. Moyo (2018) posits that for economic growth to take place there should be an increase in government spending. This will result in increased income for the population in a particular place. Citizens need to hold leaders accountable and foster transparency.

### **Democratisation of Development**

The participation of citizens in development depends on a number of issues, among which rest the principles of transparency, accountability, and empowerment. According to Parvin (2018), there are changing patterns of citizen participation in a more inclusive and transparent process. All citizens should have equal opportunities to participate meaningfully in development. The profound changes in citizen participation are the growth of democratic values and principles anchored in transparency, accountable government, and government that empowers its citizens. One of the deterrant factors to citizen participation has been the bureaucratic principles of legacy governments – centralisation of all decision-making processes and promotion of less transparent values and ethics. Berner et al. (2011) asserts that one of the strategies of local and national governments to promote greater citizen participation has been the

promotion of the ideals of a democratic society in which authorities are held accountable to the communities they serve. Local authorities therefore have a role to create such a democratic society in which everyone is given opportunities to spur development in their communities.

Asmorowati (2013) studied the Indonesian poverty reduction program and found the existence of difficulties involved in shifting the organizational principles that allow devolution of power to communities. She found that increasingly influential groups are usually controlled by the elite who create barriers that block the community from gaining access to participatory development. The majority of people in the community are not as affluent as the elite and are generally poor. Her study asserts that while bureaucracy is generally viewed as a rational tool for the administration and management of poverty reduction programs, centralised governance processes need reformation if government is to effectively communicate with grassroots communities. Asmorowati (2013) acknowledges that the impact of using local expertise to empower communities so they can undertake their own development, while they demand accountability from government and its officials, is largely dependent on the political context. Some characters within the bureaucracy and community have the potential to threaten the interface and the anticipated collaboration or partnership between bureaucracy and community. Principles at variance are that bureaucracy emphasises expertise with pragmatic highly focused relationships and impersonal relationships and rules, while on the other hand, the community is anchored on open, diffuse, effective relationship, and informality. Approachability is a hallmark of community relationships. On the other hand, Chirisa and Matamanda (2019) shared that power is vital in politics and is normally used as a force to silence or threaten people, resulting in citizens to participate in a way they should not have acted. Citizens will end up forced to participate in planning meetings as a way of fearing to be labelled if they don't accept plans that are prepared by public officials.

Referring to communities in rural Nigeria at Rivers State, Kaka (2018) maintained that rural communities are faced with underdevelopment crises in spite of the existence of wealth from gas and oil. The state must be the main institution that caters for the requirements of this municipal. The malice of corruption has been identified as rife in government operations at the state level. Kaka (2018) also observed that misuse of public resources is rampant by public officials thereby leading to only a few who are connected benefiting from resource exploitation by the elites. Thus, due process should be undertaken if corruption is to be eliminated when transactions are done in the community. The study established that when elected politicians in government abuse their power, it dents citizens' freedom and the state. Government officials that encourage corruption to happen in areas under their jurisdiction abuse their power. Elected officials have the privilege of dictating types of projects and programs that citizens can use as they are deemed to have little or no influence in the decision making matrix. Citizens are viewed as passive recipients' not active citizens. The study recommended that to balance equity, it is necessary to conduct a policy review and improve the accountability of development committees, which should include the holding of town hall meetings and public hearings of the community to participate fully. Most importantly, community meetings must not be used for political expedience by elites to lure citizens to vote for them but should be a platform for citizens to share what they think about development plans that they have.

Crook (2003) argues that it is common for government to respond to rural communities' needs as they are linked with political patronage. This hampers development efforts. Community involvement in development planning plays a central role in national development (Speer & Vasquez, 2013). When the community is involved, it must include having authority to influence the instructions and the execution of the project rather than just waiting to get its share of development benefits and advantages (Padmavathy & Poyyamoli, 2011).

## Participation Policy

In an effort to improve service delivery and governance, most governments at national and subnational levels are increasingly assuming a participatory mechanism (Rugo, 2013). The governments deliberately institute administrative, fiscal, economic, and political policies that may stimulate greater citizen participation. Through its officials, the government should pursue policies that promote inclusion. One such policy is the decentralisation of decision-making roles of the government to local communities. Participation of citizens has been theorised in a number of theories, with the participatory theory anchoring most of the theoretical arguments. Enslin (2020) highlights some of the causes that influence participation of citizens and among those factors is citizenship. Enslin (2020) defined citizenship as the driving force that enables people to have values, identity, and right to participate. McGregor and Chatiza (2020) view citizenship as a tool used by African politicians to ‘gift’ their patrons in matters related to urban land and housing development issues. Parameters are set on the individuals and groups that participate and the level of participation. Hence, this will lead to limited citizen participation. Arnstein (1969) postulates that participation of citizens vary from tokenism participation (low) to full participation (high), where citizens are free to participate in decision making. Although citizens can participate in decision making, public officials also play a role in determining participation. Matamanda and Chinozvina (2020) argued that participation of citizens is limited because planners assume that they have knowledge of what citizens want. This will lead to passive participation as citizens are left with limited role to play in the planning process of their community or district. Nyama and Mukwada (2022) posit that true citizen participation relates to empowerment of citizens, and participation without redistribution of power is not genuine involvement of communities. The government needs to be close to the people, and this can be achieved through decentralization of its services to be close to its citizens. Jonga (2014:77) seals the argument by stating that "decentralization of policies in Zimbabwe spurred participation and local development by creating government structures that are closer to local people". The constitution of Zimbabwe Section 264(2) uses the word people to mean citizens and these people are given powers of local governance to enhance their participation in the exercise of the powers of the state and decision making that affects them. The right of citizens to participate is also espoused in the rural district council Act as derived from the prime minister directive of 1984/5 that advocated for decentralization of power to lower echelons.

The theory of decentralization explains how structures can be set to distribute power to make decisions and significantly explains participation at lower societal levels. Matyszak (2011) argues that decentralization rose out of the total rejection of the idea of elitism. Matyszak (2011) posits that decentralization approaches relate to the question of why, how, and to whom power should be transferred in order to enhance the benefits of this approach in governance and development. As such, responsibility should be transferred from central government to local level authorities to deal with planning, management, and resource utilization. At the local level, steps must be taken to ensure involvement of citizens. Ink and Dean (1970) opine that through decentralization, members of the community are able to have a voice and claim title on plans and opportunities in their community. Green (2015) states that collaboration within the community when projects are planned and developed is crucial to the other stages of valuation and monitoring. Consequently, ordinary people should be included in development planning processes. To achieve this end, rural people require an enabling environment where they can define their needs without fear and intimidation in order to realize development themselves. Desai and Potter (2008) advocate that community involvement is a prerequisite in development projects. The RTCPA underscores the importance of consultations of citizens in development plans, which are highlighted in Sections 14 (6), 15(1), 18(1), and 70(2)(a).



### Methodology

The study makes use of an exploratory sequential mixed methodology design, since understanding the role of public officials in stimulating citizen participation in Murewa District has been understudied and thus this extant research is relatively new. Figure 1 shows the location of the district. Murewa District is one of the nine districts that are found in Mashonaland East Province. The qualitative methods used in this study provided a closer understanding of the role of public officials from the lived experiences of the officials and the personal observational judgments of the researcher (Parvin, 2018). A rich set of information was obtained as compared to rigid objective standpoints that could have been observed by adopting worldview of the positivists. A total of 396 questionnaire survey respondents was used to assess the frequency of meetings that public officials hold with residents in their area.

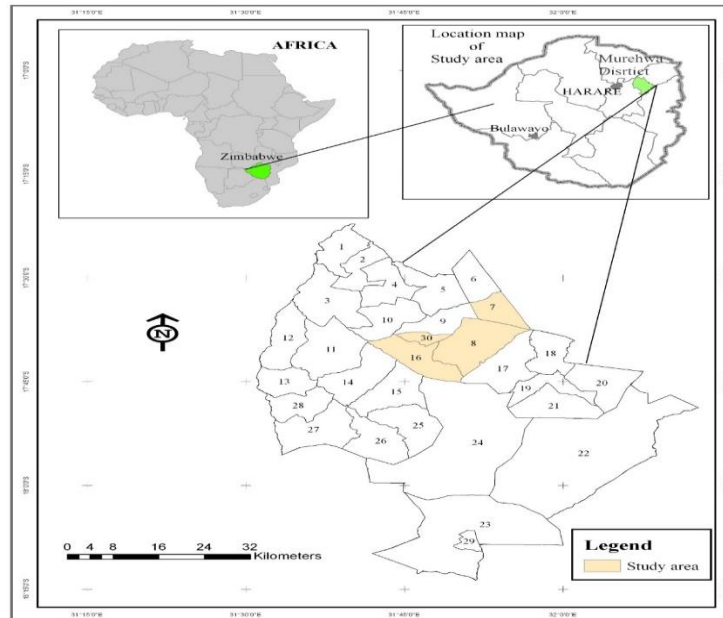


Figure1: Location of the study area (1-30 are the wards in the district)

The population targeted in this study includes public officials drawn from four wards in Murewa District, accounting for the citizens who were found in Wards 7, 8, 16 and 30 of the district. The total population of Murewa District as of 2012 census was 199 607. The district has 46284 households with an average household size of 4. The total number of people within the four wards was 33 427. According to Bhattacharjee (2012), a population is a unit of analysis which possesses traits which are under consideration in the study. The study used a multi staged sampling method to select the wards and participants for the study. First, the researchers had to purposively select the wards that characterise the district citizen participation trends. The districts within the district were not homogeneous but defined by different characteristics. For example, Ward 7 represented the wards that are found in the resettlement area because it is located in a resettlement area, Ward 8 characterised the communal areas, Ward 16 represented the peri-urban wards and Ward 30 characterised the presence of the district's growth point, an urban development center. Second, involved selection of public officials in Murewa District that were targeted. Purposive sampling ensured that all of these characteristics of the district were represented. By doing so, the representativeness of the sample was improved. Furthermore, to select participants (officials), researchers had to purposively identify those officials who possessed appropriate knowledge and information on the different roles that officials played in stimulating or dissuading citizens to participate in local development. The strength of this method was that it targeted people who had reliable

knowledge as key informants. Ethical clearance was obtained before data collection and informed consent was sought before soliciting information from the respondents.

Using interview guides that contain relevant questions on citizen participation, researchers sought verbal and written consent from each participant prior to the interviews. Thirty participants, including the chief executive officer, councillors, district administrator, and village heads, were interviewed with an average time of forty-five minutes per interview. All interviewees consented to the electronic recording of the interviews in addition to the capture of field notes during the interviews. After each interview was completed, the researchers showed the interviews to verify the authenticity of the records. Where the interviewees felt their views were not correctly captured, the script was amended accordingly. The final field notes from which transcriptions were made were used once for the qualitative data analysis presented in this study. The quantitative data from the structured survey was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS), version 16.

## **Results and Discussion**

This part of the paper presents the study results in relations to the objective of the research as well as discussion of the results. The results are divided into three main subsections that were discovered during data gathering: government's participatory and decentralization policy, democratization of participatory space, and participatory environment in Murewa District, in that order.

### **Government's Participatory and Decentralization Policy in Murewa District**

In Murewa District, most planning and development agendas are bestowed on local government officials. The constitution as the supreme law of the land, it sets the framework for citizen engagement and citizenship. Section 13 of the Zimbabwe Constitution highlights that the state and all institutions and agencies of government at every level must endeavour to facilitate rapid and equitable development. This can be done by allowing local communities to benefit from local resources in their areas, as well as by fostering decentralization and devolution. The Regional Town and Country Planning Chapter 29:12 notes that local planning authorities are given the mandate to decide on the affairs within their areas of jurisdiction as they are considered to be better positioned in making decisions ahead of people in the area. It is this belief that citizens feel that their role in development planning will be limited as technocrats 'planners' do everything on their behalf. The Environmental Management Act stipulates that the minister of environment must consult authorities and persons that they deem necessary when drafting the national environment plans, and this will result in citizen participation to be at lower level according to the Arnstein ladders of participation. *Since we pay rates, it is the duty of council officials to plan on our behalf as they are educated do to the job*, one male resident in Ward 8. Another resident in Ward 7 added that *council officials are best suited to do that job, as they are qualified to be us residents, so they should continue to plan for us*. The provision in the RTCPA has resulted in local authority officials in planning and making decisions on behalf of citizens. Although local authority officials are given mandate by statues to make laws on behalf of the citizens, some citizens believe that they have a role to play in this regards as they know more about the community. One female responded in Ward 16 alluded that *I was born in this community so I know more about this community than technocrats who want to plan on our behalf as a community*. As the owners of their communities citizens tend to rely heavily on the indigenous knowledge system (IKS) of the area, hence the need for technical assistance from council officials. The sentiments that were revealed by the respondents are similar to the ones that are advocated by the proponents of bottom up planning approaches using participatory development.

Decentralization has not defined how the local authorities and local communities' interface and solve development problems collectively. As shown in the results of this study, this loophole has created

more challenges for development planning than the original centralized process. For instance, local authorities seem to focus on addressing their political goals other than the socio-economic needs of the communities. Some residents believe that the council works only with the elected few councilors. They think that the council deliberately suppresses their views so that they are not heard.

*“We do not play any role, nor do the councilors involve us in decision-making. Our councilor only works with a selected group of people, which promotes political division. We are supposed to play a role in decision-making, but our voices as citizens are being blocked, which is our right to speak out”* reported one male (Ward 8 FGD-Group 3).

The various dimensions of decentralization and understanding and the level and degree of power sharing between different actors in the Murewa District were explored. The study found that decentralization only explains how power and decision making are distributed to lower ranks of government, but does not explain how decisions are then made within those lower structures of government. The assumption that groups of people at lower levels are homogenous and consequently can equally influence decisions at such levels is inappropriate. When citizens at the lower level are given responsibility in decision making matrix, this will result in sustainable development as citizens will safeguard their interests and projects.

Citizens' participation occurs within a well-defined national and local development trajectory. It is the role of public officials to provide frameworks and guidance in the participation of citizens in development. Findings from this research show that it is the duty of public officials to decide which issues to the public debate and decide on and which issues are in the hands of the authorities. The village head as representative of the citizens felt that local authorities and government officials were sidelining citizens in the decision-making roles. One major reason for the poor leadership role of authorities emanates from views of authors such as Kamuzhanje (2008) who conceive local development planning as too technical to deserve the participation of citizens. Development planning is assumed to be the property of the educated elite who really understands the technical details of the planning process. Within this perspective, Kimathi (2016) proposes that local authorities should therefore educate the public and provide the technical skills needed for all communities to participate. This is also supported by Section 26 of the Environmental Management Act, which encourages experts to be involved in technicality issues that are beyond the ordinary citizens. It was the perception of the village leaders that citizens should be given direction and skills to effectively participate in the determination of the development needs of the district. The authorities have to provide a preliminary planning framework upon which the citizens can effectively participate. This includes the provision of draft plans and budgets for citizens to suggest their needs and provide the direction on which the district may take. The findings showed that local and national officials did not show great willingness to represent the needs and wants of the citizens in their planning and prioritisation agenda. This was shown by their reported tendency to convert development meetings into political discourses. Citizens through their village heads felt that the local authorities have technical expertise in the development process and possess the technical know-how of development and therefore they were to distribute such to all citizens to ensure that citizens can effectively contribute to the development of their communities. This echoes with suggestions by Rugo (2013) that participation of citizens involves multi-views from different people with different backgrounds and thus may require some focus. It is then the duty of the government to provide that focus and direction against overall national priorities (Chikerema, 2013).

## **Democratization of Participatory Space in Murewa District**

The results of the study reveal that communities in Murewa District are not homogeneous. There are different social players: citizens, community leaders, local authorities, political parties, and public officials wield different powers. The interaction of these social players during public meetings and



development planning processes such as budgeting showed that local authorities are still wielding control over most decision making, with citizens relegated to tokenism and manipulation during the implementation of projects. *The budget is first discussed with the chief of Murewa District to get his pass before it is taken to other residents of Murewa District for endorsement:* One council official. This was also corroborated by a resident who shared that during *the budget consultation officials they come with a budget to us and present it in a rushed manner and we don't have time to analyse it as we are not given the budget in advance although we participate:* a female participant during a Ward 7 focus group. Although citizens appreciate that they have a critical role to play in development planning, exercising that role is a responsibility of national government officials and local authorities. Thus, the decentralisation theory also aids in empowering citizens, but on its own it does not ensure citizen empowerment or participation.

In Murewa District, the village heads reported that the council works only with a few selected councilors and council executives, marginalizing the views of the citizens. Alluding to this democratization shortfall, one village head stated:

*"We do not play any role neither does the councilor involve us in decision-making. The councilor only works with a selected group, which is paramount in political division. We are supposed to play a role in decision-making, but our voices as citizens are being blocked, which is our right to speak out"* reported one male.

This narrative shows a contradiction in what the council employees have said and the observation of some ordinary citizens. It shows a skewed way of operation by the councilor, who displays a partisan approach to involvement of the citizens. The blocking of contributions done to citizens who do not belong to the same political party as the councilor does not augur well for a democratic dispensation. All voices matter in development issues. Citizens perceive that elected councilors should act as servants of the people and promote development. Some village heads reached by this study felt that corruption, lack of transparency, and indiscipline among council officials dissuaded citizens from adequately participating in most local development projects. This has led residents in Murewa District to dislike being involved in some projects which they regard as being implemented for political reasons, hence the delay in the completion of those projects. Examples cited by residents include a dip tank project in Chitsaukire Village in Ward 8 and the Zaranyika clinic project in Ward 5, which were abandoned because they were proposed by a councilor from an opposition political party. Gumbo (2020) suggest that since the formation of the MDC in the late 1990s, the prevailing political environment often leads to physical fights and confrontations in villages over party membership and allegiance.

The findings of this study show that the citizens felt marginalised and their views were rarely respected by the authorities. *I attend meetings that are called by my councillor and suggest what I think is best for the ward, to my surprise what I suggest with other colleagues is not taken into consideration year in year out, I think we are being taken for granted,* said one male respondent in Ward 8. Citizens may feel to be part of the development spectrum if their values are respected. The role of local authorities in the democratization of the development process was perceived as one of the missing links in the local development planning in the Murewa District.

Asmorowati (2013) posits that one of the strategies of local and national government to promote greater citizen participation has been the promotion of the ideals of democratic society in which authorities are held accountable to the communities they serve. Local authorities therefore have a role to create such a democratic society in which everyone is given opportunities to spur development in their communities. Murewa District officials must change the legacy bureaucratic culture to allow devolution of power to communities.

## Participatory Environment in Murewa District

The results of interviews conducted with the council executives in Murewa District suggest that since 2002 the way the council administration has changed. This change demonstrates an improvement in the participation of citizens in development planning. All councilors seemed to agree about the positive impact of citizen participation in the administration of the council, which they reported as now involving youth, women, and disabled citizens, who are now engaged on different platforms regarding issues that affect them.

*“A lot of changes have taken place in the administration of the council. This also has an impact on citizen participation. There has been some consultation of people between 2002 to date. The youth, the women and the disabled have been engaged in different platforms on issues that affect them. Thus, there has been a bigger margin of change, which was necessitated with change of management, old minds vacating offices for youthful administrator.”* (Executive Officer)

*“As council, we are a service delivery entity. We are created to offer services like health, infrastructure and education. That in itself shows we are interacting with the people; in the same manner we have budget circles. This entails that before we formulate the budget we go to the people in the wards, ward by ward. In the past we used to do it at traditional ward level but we found that this excluded some people in the process”* (Councilor)

Local authorities and the government at large are expected to provide opportunities for citizen participation in development planning. It is the duty of the councillors, village heads, administrators, and executive officers to offer platforms on which citizens express their views and exercise their rights to define their own destiny. The planning and design of meetings and training workshops is the responsibility of the government. These platforms provide opportunities for citizens to express their views and even suggest priority projects and development interventions (Chikerema, 2013). Evidence from this study showed that public officials still exercise dominance over development planning, even to the extent of completely excluding the wishes of the general public. For example, the unilateral conversion development planning meetings into political agendas dissuades citizens from participating. The results of this study show that authorities operate within defined political and legal frameworks that do not necessarily reflect an effective distribution of power to citizens. The Murewa District comes to life through political campaigns that are hosted by different political parties during the time of elections. Seventy percent of the participants alluded to development planning meetings that are called by the elected leaders, which end up as mere campaign platforms for winning the next election. Development meetings are mostly conducted towards elections. These meetings have witnessed a reduced number of attendants due to the politicized nature of their proceedings.

The results of this study also show that the local authority conducts quarterly client satisfaction surveys to gauge people's satisfaction with the performance of the council in the district. These are conducted at ward level. The purpose of the surveys is to allow residents of each ward to have an input in developing measures that can improve how the local authority is discharging its duties. Citizens are given the opportunity to make suggestions that the council could implement to improve service delivery. These surveys have created a sense of empowerment on the part of ordinary citizens, as advocated by the participatory development theory that anchors this study. Interviews with council officials showed that the results of customer satisfaction surveys have led to improvement in water supply in the district, which was achieved through the drilling of wells. Another improvement relates to access to health services, which resulted from the scrapping of user fees in rural health centres. The government scrapped the fees after the surveys had established that rural health centers were charging fees against government policy. However, one way through which the participatory environment could be improved is the holding of regular stakeholder meetings.

The frequency of stakeholder meetings called by the village heads, councilors, and chief executive officer are shown in Figure 1.

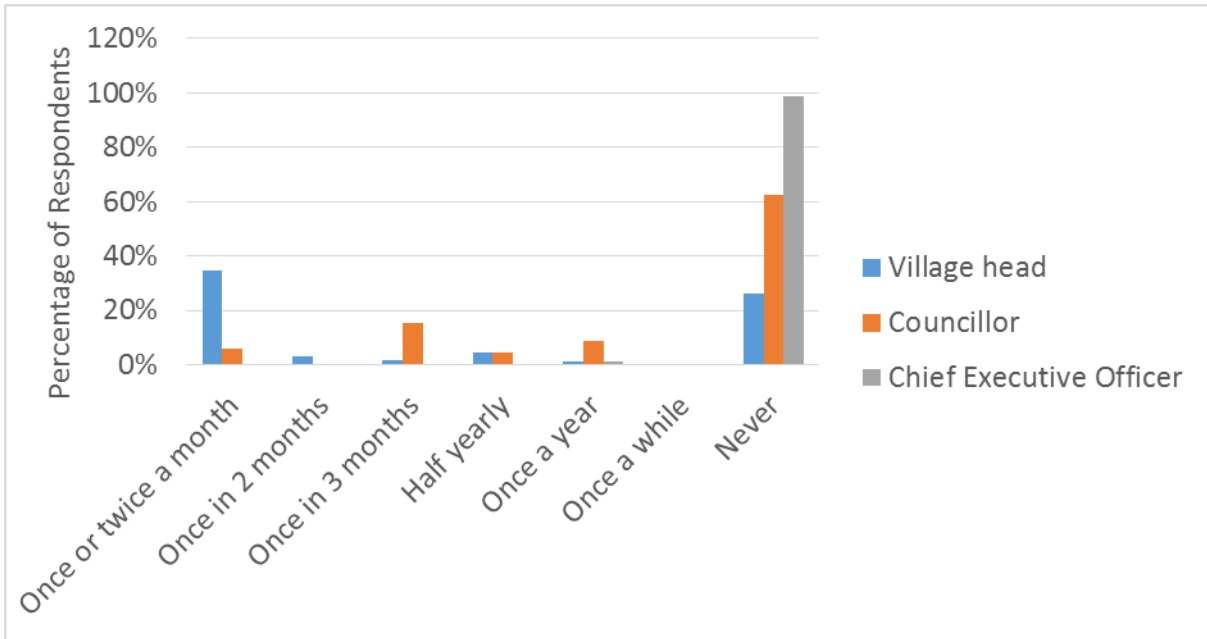


Figure 2: Frequency of meetings with various stakeholders

Ninety-nine percent of the respondents have never attended any developmental meeting called by the chief executive officer, while 63% and 36% of the respondents have never attended developmental meetings organized by their councillor or village head, respectively. However, the majority of councilors who were interviewed claimed that they held regular meetings with their respective constituencies, but the survey evidence shows a low frequency of meetings held. In Murewa District, ordinary citizens noted that the polarized political environment, which often leads to violent confrontations in some villages, which are usually triggered by party affiliations and political allegiance issues, does not create a conducive environment for improved service delivery and successful implementation of development projects in the district.

From the foregoing discussion, it can be argued that though most citizens acknowledged that there is space for them to participate in local development activities, their local representatives and leaders put restrictions on this participation because of political polarization. In Murewa District, local communities are only engaged in providing ideas, but are not given the opportunity to make decisions about alternative development projects and programmes in the district. Understanding the web of actors in community development is critical in exploring the conditions under which development processes can be improved. The development process is a state of struggle and negotiation between different stakeholders. It involves allowing citizens to participate in decision-making. Local authorities and public officials should act to empower citizens to enable them to make decisions about development planning, as well as the ideation and initiation of projects, as citizens should be the ultimate beneficiaries of these processes. Citizens should not be taken as passive recipients of interventions, but active players in these interventions (Lucas 1975; Martin, 2010). Thus, local authorities in Murewa District could need to be an active agency that stimulates citizen participation rather than acting as a source of impediment. In this regard, council officials should consider themselves as part of the network of knowledge systems and not the knowledge hub themselves. The citizens of Murewa District understand their own needs better than anyone else and they know the interventions that could be most appropriate to meet these needs.

Therefore, public officials should act in the interest of promoting more participation of citizens and empowering citizens to meet their own needs. Based on the results of this study, the decentralization process in Zimbabwe, which is largely a matter of legal and institutional arrangements, does not yet provide sufficient means to reduce the dormancy of citizens.

As shown by the results of this study, in Murewa district the participation of some citizens in development planning is limited by the limited space provided to them by the local government, particularly with respect to the design of development programs, as well as the expected results of these programs. However, both citizens and authorities in this district indicated that citizens are significantly engaged in the implementation of infrastructure development projects such as road construction, borehole drilling, and footbridge construction. This implies that local government authorities in Murewa District are not sufficiently engaging local citizens in local economic development. The failure to incorporate the views of the communities in the early stages of project implementation could be one of the reasons for low turnout at meetings. Based on Participatory Development Theory (PDT) and evidence from this research, it can be argued that citizens need to be placed at the centre of any development planning process because they are the engine that initiates and drives development change within communities, especially in rural areas.

### **Conclusion**

The role of public officials in Murewa District has been explored. Several conclusions can be drawn regarding the participation of citizens in development planning in the district. First, the participatory and decentralization policy of the government has not taken root sufficiently in the district. There has been a contradiction between the narratives given by the government officers interviewed and the village heads. The village heads representing citizens revealed the partisanship that is exercised by public officials and councilors from different political parties, who tended to marginalize the views of purported opposition party supporters. This is an area that needs to be addressed as dividing the rural flock on party political lines is detrimental to development planning and execution. Second, in the Murewa District, the democratization of participatory space is still limited. Due to the dominance of council officials in development planning, there is limited involvement of citizens in decision making. Third, there is some improvement in the development of a participatory environment in the district. This improvement could be sustained by better planning programmes, participation of citizens in nonpartisan development meetings, and through training workshops. As demonstrated in the foregoing discussion, citizen participation cannot be separated from the role of local and national public officials who have to offer leadership to the development process, create the required democratic culture through implementing the decentralization agenda stipulated in the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe and adopting participatory policy at all levels of government. Therefore, local authorities and public officials should take measures that empower citizens in Murewa to enable them to fully and actively participate in development planning so that citizens do not remain passive recipients of development interventions, but active players in these interventions.

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