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**Youth participation structures in
Zimbabwe: A lens into the
experiences of rural youth within
WADCOS and VIDCOS.**

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Abstract

Although the African Youth Charter emphasizes the role of the youth as ‘partners, assets and prerequisites for sustainable development’, there remains an existential marginalisation of youth from the policy making and governance structures. In an attempt to operationalise inclusivity, predominantly rural Zimbabwe (as the case with most African states) has ensured decentralisation through equitable youth participation (regulated by the Rural District Councils Act and the Traditional Leaders Act). The effectiveness of such frameworks and institutions in facilitating for the full participation of youth in policy making and governance however, has not been interrogated. In doing so, this study examined the degree of child and youth involvement in Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) and Ward Development Committees (WADCOS). This involved a case study-based exploratory inquiry of Ward 12 Masvingo where three FGDs were held with youth as well as four in-depth interviews with civil society representatives and youth ward coordinators. In concurrence with other studies that argue that rural societies in Zimbabwe are patriarchal and repressive towards children, women and youth, this study’s findings revealed how, despite available legislation governing youth participation at village level, the actual practice alienates young people from decision making. The institutional set up of VIDCOs and WADCOS was also identified in the study as adversely inhibiting young people’s participation. The study thus recommends capacity building of community leaders and elected representatives who oversee VIDCOs and WADCOS so that young people have maximum utility of such structures.

1. Introduction

In Zimbabwe, although citizen participation ranks as a high priority for most development partners operating in the country, the youth as a demographic group have suffered from marginalisation. The 2016-2020 Zimbabwe United Nations Development Assistance Framework (ZUNDAF), which is the United Nations (UN) strategic programme framework to support national development priorities in Zimbabwe, outlines participatory measures (United Nations, 2015). ZUNDAF outlines six priorities, i.e. Food and Nutrition Security, Gender Equality, HIV and AIDS, Poverty Reduction and Value Addition, Public Administration and Governance, and Social Services and Protection. The gender equality component outlines the need for enhanced qualitative and quantitative participation of girls within decision making positions and structures. Within Zimbabwe's rural areas, this is of paramount importance given how such areas are predominantly considered patriarchal and repressive towards children, women, as well as the youth (Schmidt, 1991; Gordon, 1994; Chiweshe et al., 2015). In cognizance of how scholars such as Zeldin (2004) emphasise the importance of young people's active participation or inclusion in organizational governance, this study explores the views of children and youth on the rural governance participation structures, namely the Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) and the Ward Development Committees (WADCOs).

In this study, VIDCOs and WADCOs are conceptualised as a plausible means of addressing some of the deprivations impacting on youths, i.e. voice, representation and influence (Gaventa and Runciman, 2016). This use of rural VIDCOs and WADCOs is pertinent in Zimbabwe as 70% of youth in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) reside in rural areas (Bennell, 2007), in contrast to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) estimate that around 55% of youth reside in rural areas (Bennell, 2007). Zimbabwe is a microcosmic representation of this scenario with 77% of its population living in the rural areas (Nyoni and Bonga, 2017). While the global youth population was projected to reach a peak of 1.5 billion by 2035, the bulk of this population increase is forecast to occur in SSA, i.e. 26% increase between 2005 and 2035 (Bennell, 2007). Similarly, such high population statistics for the youth are discernible in Zimbabwe where the below 30 age group is 69.8% of the national population (Oosterom, 2018). Given these statistics at both a national and continental level, the exploration into the VIDCO and WADCO structures by this study is thus relevant.

These structures' legal basis within local communities is derived from how the Zimbabwean law accommodates such participatory platforms and regulates them through the Rural District Councils Act Chapter 29:13 and the Traditional Leaders Act Chapter 29:17. The public administration and governance component in Zimbabwe is also emphatic on the need for increased citizen participation within

the country's democratic processes as enshrined in the constitution. Young people's engagement thus promotes positive youth development whilst increasing organizational effectiveness. It also affirms youth commitment to the vision of the organization and is relevant to Zimbabwe as young people will adopt the national vision that is articulated in local platforms. For that reason, the perceptions of Zimbabwean children and youth towards VIDCOs and WADCOs constituted a critical departure point in this study. The definition of youth was delimited to mean all persons between 15-35 years of age as stipulated in the 2013 Zimbabwe National Youth Policy, which was designed in accordance and alignment with the continental African Youth Charter (National Youth Policy [NYP], 2000; African Union, 2006). Although there is a clear mandate for inclusionary participation (as evidenced by the United Nations' attempts to address all discriminations and foster co-existence or policy frameworks that develop a peace architecture), the political will to promote this participation appears to be missing from the Zimbabwean government. This study thus discovered how, through their institutional set up, VIDCOs and WADCOs were an impediment to young people's participation in decision making processes.

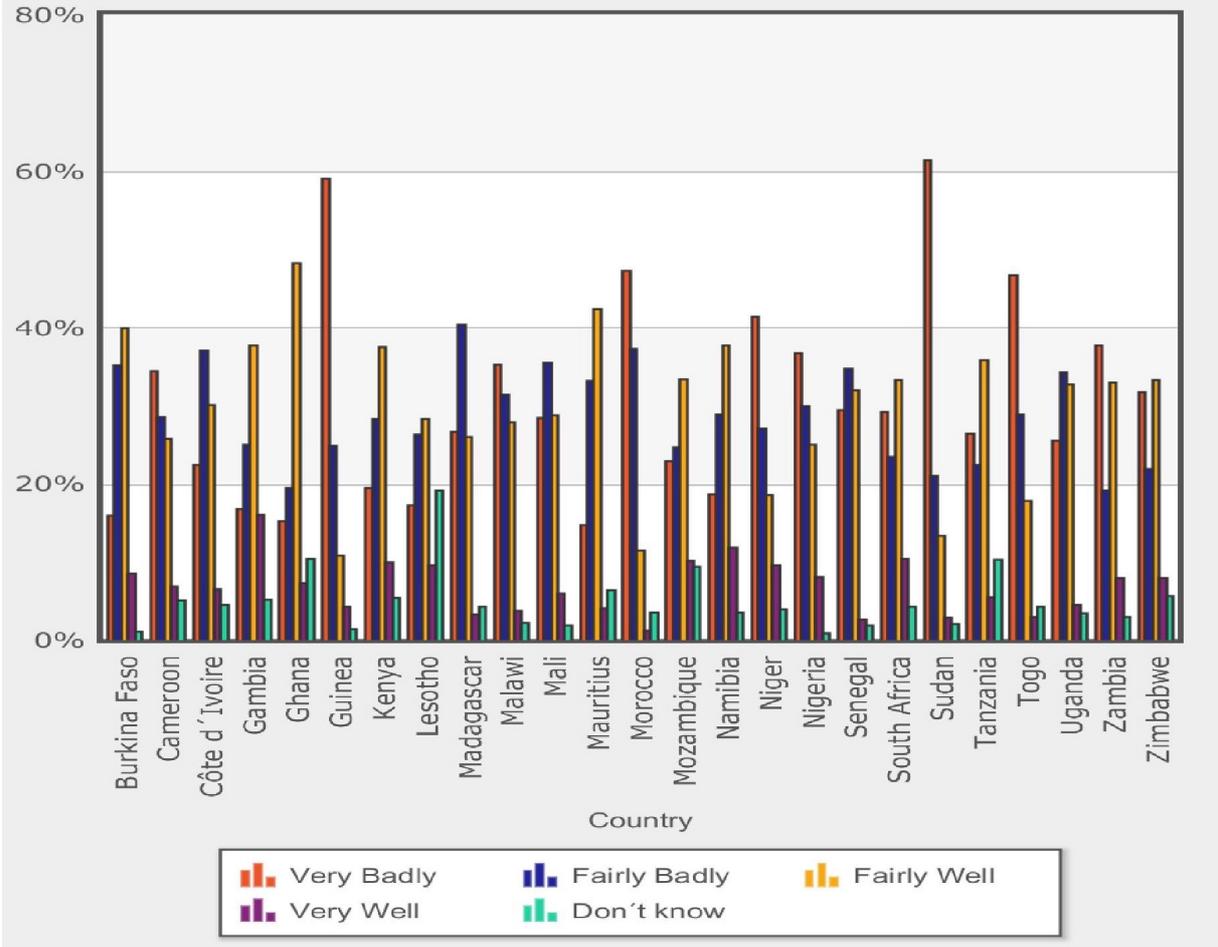
2. Background

Across the African continent, the domination by gerontocrats of the political and bureaucratic space, in countries such as Malawi, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, etc., has proliferated the exclusion of youth from equitable participation or representation within the policy making and governance discourse (Aguilar, 1998; Moghadam, 2014). Despite the OAU having been formed in 1963, the formation of a youth charter only occurred in 2009, i.e., 46 years later. Although the Pan African Youth Movement (PYM) had its inception in the early 1960's, there has, however, been little evidence of support from the African Union (AU) towards such youth bodies (Amupanda, 2018). Despite the African Youth Charter theoretically emphasizing the role of the youth as 'partners, assets and prerequisites for sustainable development' (African Union, 2017: 3), the absence of support towards youth bodies has remained a cause for concern even after the PYM transformed in 2003 to the Pan African Youth Union (PYU). This situation was worsened in 2017 by the introduction of yet another youth advocacy group in the form of the African Youth Commission (AYC), which was an intended successor of the African Union Youth Working Group (AUYWG). Despondency and lack of unity amongst these institutions has thus significantly derailed the youth agenda within Africa as a continent.

In theory, talks from the African Union on furthering the youth agenda have been quite animated as exemplified by the spirited dedication of the year 2017 towards 'Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through investments in Youth' (Gay et

al. 2017: 2). To fulfil this goal, a roadmap was developed with a view to expedite the implementation of a continental initiative on the demographic dividend for Africa (African Union, 2017), and to establish key deliverables and concrete action for 2017 as well as beyond. Although such inclusion of youths within political systems is an essential pillar of democracy and civic participation (Richter and Panday, 2007), this has not metamorphosed into tangible results within the majority of African states. In its 2017 roadmap, the AU (African Union, 2017: 9) laid down accompanying principles and values, including transparency, democracy, good governance, anti-corruption, rule of law, as well as women and youth participation in decision making at all levels. Operationalising such ideals has, however, remained a principal challenge. In the wake of a discernible theory-praxis gap, very little has been done in most African states to ensure the transference of such edicts (Richter and Panday, 2007). In a 2018 Afrobarometer survey of Africa, most citizens’ perceptions of how their governments were handling the needs of the youth indicated an abysmal approach to such issues. The results of the survey are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Africans’ opinions of how their governments address the needs of youth



Source: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the needs of youth? Afrobarometer (2018).

Authentic engagement of youth through discussion, debate and decision making provides a mechanism to enhance social justice (Augsberger et al., 2018). Although the African Youth Charter, in Article 11 (d), has provisions for youth participation in various aspects of community life (including decision making and civic duty), studies carried out in South Africa have demonstrated a nexus between youth poverty and the absence of socio-economic or political participation (Richter and Panday, 2007). The African Youth Charter presents a guideline for youth development, with its preamble outlining the view that Africa's greatest asset is its youthful population (African Union, 2017). Through Article 11 (b), state parties are also obligated to strengthen youth participation in decision making at local, national, regional and continental levels, while Article 11 (e) compels states to sensitize the youth on available opportunities and their rights to participate in decision making or civic life. The potential benefits of an included or empowered youth include an increased national workforce, as well as an increased market for goods and services on the continent, provided there exists an enabling policy framework (Jimenez and Murthi, 2006; Harper, 2017).

Despite the progressive proclamations in the African Youth Charter mentioned above, the problems at the centre of youth exclusion and marginalisation on the continent have become entrenched in governance institutions. This has sparked confrontation and protests, making the relationship between the youth and government evermore conflictive. For example, in Senegal, political exclusion and continued impoverishment have been conceptualised as some of the precipitating factors behind youth violent protests (Hanlon et al. 2017). In places such as Mali and Chad, youth protests are perennially staged in the struggle for equitable citizenship or belonging and rightful representation (Resnick and Thurlow, 2015). In South African politics and decision-making institutions, the youth (amongst other groups) suffer from three types of deprivations, i.e. deprivations of voice, representation and influence (Gaventa and Runciman, 2016). In absolute contrast to the African Youth Charter Preamble that epitomizes youths as assets, young people in most African states are often viewed as liabilities and security threats. Using Zimbabwe as an instrumental case, this study thus explores the challenges surrounding the full inclusion or participation of young people within the space of policy making and governance.

3. Legal framework governing youth participation

3.1 The Convention on the Rights of the Child

To have a better understanding of the legal framework that provides for citizen participation, there is a need to explore various legislative instruments surrounding child and youth participation in Africa. Globally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provides a framework for protecting children and promoting their participation. The CRC was entered into force in September 1990 and provides an overarching framework for children's rights (United Nations Center for Human Rights [UNCHR], 1991). The CRC contributes towards understanding the concept of childhood, which is given as a social construct (Appell, 2009). The preamble begins with a consideration that children need to be prepared to live within a society in the spirit of peace, tolerance and solidarity (UNCHR, 1991). This presents an opportunity for practitioners and interested institutions to develop innovative ways to promote children's development. The preamble also makes an assumption on the evolving capability of children, as tolerance and solidarity are values that are learnt and practiced at different fora in societal life.

Article 13 of the CRC speaks to the right to freedom of expression which includes the right to seek and impart information and ideas. Article 13 of the CRC also makes assumptions on the capability of young people to form their own opinion which may in turn benefit society, i.e. participating develops their capacity to exercise critical thinking (Björnsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017: 288). To this effect, the state is then obligated to ensure that platforms to practice and enjoy freedom of expression are availed. Zimbabwe has struggled in this regard, notoriously codifying a host of legislation that has been blamed for limiting adult's freedom of expression (Moore, 2011; Holland, 2012). With the state failing to prioritise adult participation, would possibly not be prioritised or if they were, their concerns would not be foregrounded (Resnick and Thurlow, 2015).

In respect of children living with disability, Article 23 outlines the state's obligation to provide conditions that promote and facilitate for their active participation in the community. At a national level, most African states have failed to adopt such global guidelines, i.e. the operationalisation of mechanisms that safeguard the living potentials of disabled children while also ensuring their rights to meaningful and equitable participation. The availing of engagement platforms (through government initiatives), has also been an area where Zimbabwe has particularly failed, often surrogating the promotion of participation and community development projects to donor agencies (Bornstein, 2004; Sithole et al., 2013). As an institution, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) developed

a plan of action on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that outlines the need for children and adolescents to be able to freely express their views according to their evolving capacity (UNICEF, 2002). Children also need to acquire knowledge and skills for conflict resolution, decision making and communication. Once children have participated and communicated their concerns, there is need for their views to be respected and taken into account, particularly on issues affecting their welfare. This theme has been continued under the banner of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with citizen education, a theme under SDGs four and sixteen (United Nations, 2015; Nilsson et al, 2016).

3.2 Legislation in Zimbabwe

At a national level, Zimbabwe has the 2013 National Constitution, Traditional Leaders Act and Rural District Councils Act outlining provisions for youth participation. The Zimbabwean Constitution outlines the measures expected for youth in Sections 19, 20 and 81. The 2013 Zimbabwe National Youth Policy, African Youth Charter, as well as the 1991 Convention of the Rights of the Child (NYP, 2000; African Union, 2006), designate the 15-17 age groups as youth. In Zimbabwe, they are, however, (contradictorily) disfranchised from full participation due to how Section 81 of the Constitution designates anyone below the age of 18 as a child (Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2016). There is therefore a need for the country to align its laws in according with the 2013 National Constitution. Some of the existential challenges emanating from a failure to do so, e.g. the adverse impact this has had on the evolution of a democratic culture amongst children, are discussed in the proceeding sections. Nonetheless, the 15-17 age groups in Zimbabwe can still make claim to the rights of participation by virtue of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 13) which speaks to the right to freedom of expression (including the right to seek and impart information and ideas).

The Traditional Leaders Act (Chapter 29:17) provides for the establishment of Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) in line with the Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:13). The VIDCO is accountable to the Village Assembly (VA) and outlines community project priorities. The VA elects and supervises the VIDCO, reviews village development plans before submission to the Ward Development Committee for incorporation into the Ward Development Plan. This VIDCO should deliberate as a committee as well as consult other community members on issues of concern. The VA is also tasked with deliberating on all issues pertaining to natural resources (including land and water), while also making suitable submissions according to the village plan. This therefore requires adequate village representation and without special consideration of all young people (including the 15-17 age groups as well as those living with disability), it means the VA is at risk of making non-representative resolutions.

The Traditional Leaders Act (Chapter 29:17) also provides for the establishment of VAs to deliberate on all matters affecting the interests and well-being of the village dwellers. VAs therefore comprise all dwellers who are over the age of 18 years. As argued before, the age factor is again limiting for dwellers aged between 15-17 years. As many young people aged 20-25 years migrate to urban areas in search of jobs, the exclusion of the 15-17 age group means that the VA will predominantly comprise seniors, who may be out of touch with the issues affecting those aged below 18 years. In the wake of climate change and given how Zimbabwe has a predominantly youthful population (Nyoni and Bonga, 2017), young people's input towards resolutions that determine their future needs, in regards to land and water for livelihoods, is of paramount importance. Any form of exclusion (on the basis of age or disability) thus incapacitates the Traditional Leaders Act's mandate of providing for the establishment of requisite decision-making structures, pertinent in the development of rural communities.

4. Benefits and barriers to youth participation

There are numerous social and national benefits to promoting a culture of youth participation as it forms part of a much broader discourse on public participation and social justice (Cushing, 2015). Youth participation not only enhances young people's ability to socialize and share their problems without facing undue criticism, but it also promotes democratic ideals by allowing for diverse ideas to emerge (Camino and Zeldin, 2002; Björnsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017). Youth participation goes beyond the scope of mere voting every few years, and is in fact a medium for facilitating voice, agency enhancement of social justice, as well as development (Kurtenbach and Pawelz, 2015). Permitting young people to engage effectively, i.e. through unrestricted discussion, debate and decision making, possesses numerous social benefits particularly when the youth are permitted to be catalysts of change and agents of development (Egbo, 2012: 78; Augsberger et al., 2018: 41). Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development (through its motto on 'leaving no one behind'), also speaks to an inclusive approach to developmental initiatives that accommodate all demographic groups.

Despite the existence of the above-mentioned advantages to youth participation, several challenges have inhibited this from happening. Such inhibitions to the effective participation of youth in governance structures include existential threats (structural or otherwise). Structural barriers, according to Bottrell and Armstrong (2007: 354), include the processes of exclusion effected through the policies and actions of governments. Camino and Zeldin (2002: 213) concur and submit that legislation, e.g. age restrictions codified within law, can encourage the exclusion of young people from actively participating in governance structures. A study focusing on child and youth participation in Ghana also identified the emphasis

on age hierarchy as a limiting factor for participation. Apart from age, exclusion can also take a gender connotation as exemplified by the belief that allowing young women to participate would somehow make them arrogant and disrespectful (Björnsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017: 288). Citizenship functions, such as voting, serving as parliamentarians or serving on organizational boards, etc., may therefore disfranchise individuals who are not only below a stipulated age of majority, but also of a certain gender (Camino and Zeldin, 2002: 214). Nevertheless, even when progressive or inclusive policy frameworks are in existence, normative implementation gaps can still persist. In Ghana, for instance, although considerable efforts have been made in passing supportive legislation, authorities have failed to implement the agreed laws, with community members effectively limiting youth participation (Bottrell and Armstrong, 2007: 354; Björnsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017: 290).

Exclusions against young people, in contravention of existing policy frameworks (as in the Ghanaian case), are a traditional phenomenon rationalised by how children have been historically categorized as ranking below other community members, with reprisals and punishment commonly being meted out for being ‘too expressive’ (Björnsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017: 290). This phenomenon is not peculiar to Africa alone. As Stoneman (2002: 223) argues, adults, regardless of culture and nationality, believe it is their duty to educate, direct, control, discipline and entertain young people instead of listening to or learning from them. Such an approach emanates from a lack of comprehension on the benefits of youth participation. Under what has been demarcated as ‘safe’ participation, youth involvement (particularly for those aged between 15-17) has thus often been confined to the private sphere, i.e. the family, with the perilous public sphere mostly being an area for adults to control (Nairn et al., 2006: 251).

Civic knowledge programs that have a vertical top-down orientation have also failed to engage young people, i.e. when youth are invited to participate in community governance they are often expected to do so on the terms, processes and settings set by adults (Harris, 2006: 224; Augsberger et al., 2018: 44). Vertical top-down conceptualisations of youth representation have also resulted in the creation of an elite group of young people, modelled to represent all others within their demographic group. Participation has also been compromised by selective flaws of including ‘brainy kids’ or those youth who are viewed by adults as being more industrious (Nairn et al., 2006: 257). A limiting factor to participation in Zimbabwe, for instance, has been the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) strategy of utilising local structures for political control and accumulation (Alexander and McGregor, 2013). This strategy has adversely compromised the ability of governance structures to promote youth participation, while also compromising youth’s ability to fully participate in its social environment. In the wake of all these challenges, this paper proceeds to examine

the inhibitions to youth participation as a ‘social need’ (Chacón, 2007: 127), through focusing on the very structures that offer opportunities for participation in community planning.

5. Material and methods

In Zimbabwe, child and youth participation have become a complex problem which cannot be explored effectively using a quantitative design (Creswell et al., 2007; Mbaleka, 2017). The study thus adopted an exploratory approach, due to how it provided an opportunity to examine the challenge of youth participation in Zimbabwe through the lived experiences of the youth themselves. Undertaken in a rural setting, a qualitative paradigm was most ideal as it not only allowed the researcher to gain understanding of an unfamiliar environment but also empowered the participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Ross, 2017). This was particularly important, given how the study was focusing on a marginalized demographic group.

Due to the high mobility of the youth, the Youth District Office and two civil society organisations operating in ward 12 assisted in mobilizing Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants who had lived in the community for at least 2 years prior to the study. Participants in the FGD were drawn from two local villages nearest to the community centre, i.e. where the FGDs were held. With a total of 25 participants, there were three FGDs, i.e. 8 youths in the first two FGDs and 9 youths in the third FGD (Longhurst, 2003; Secor, 2010). While the study delimited its focus on the youth, i.e. the 15-35 age group (NYP, 2000; African Union, 2006), the terminology ‘child’ was adopted in the study to refer to youths who are below the legal age of majority (15-17 age group) as articulated in Section 81 of the Zimbabwean Constitution. For ethical purposes, however, the study purposively selected FGD participants above the legal age of majority with the final sample having an age range of 18-29-year-old participants. A balance was struck to accommodate youth who participated in VIDCO community meetings as well as those who did not. In depth face to face interviews were also conducted with two Youth Ward Coordinators from Ward 12 who worked with youth in local development initiatives, including youth participation in governance structures. By utilizing a list of registered organizations permitted to work within the politically volatile area, expert purposive sampling was used to select two Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) from ward 12. From these NGOs, two key informants (program managers), were purposively selected to add value to the study. Informed consent forms were distributed and signed in all instances.

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine young people's experiences of VIDCOs and WADCOs and determine the obstacles to their full participation.
2. To examine the challenges in operationalising youth participatory structures in Zimbabwe and determine how future participation could be enhanced.

6. Theory: Youth participation

The study utilised Hart's (1992) Ladder of Child Participation to explain the modes of participation offered by the VIDCOs and WADCOs. The model (consisting of varying stages of participation) has been used as a comprehensive tool for measuring performance by child protection practitioners (Eguren, 2008; Hart, 2008). The concept is based on Arnstein's (1969) essay on Adult Participation, with scholars such as Hart (1987) going on to outline the rungs as representations of varying forms of participation. At the lowest rung, manipulation is given as a level of participation. This level involves children taking up causes that they might not have an in-depth understanding of. Hart's (1992: 8) conceptualisation of manipulation, as representing a scenario whereby children are consulted but not provided with feedback, makes the framework suitable for this study. This is particularly so, given how most African governments have been accused of developing policies that further disfranchise marginalized groups (mostly due to consultation devoid of feedback) (Agbakwa, 2002; Richter and Panday, 2007; Gaventa and Runciman, 2016; Hanlon et al. 2017).

The African phenomenon where most youth and children have little opportunity to formulate their own opinions is conceptualised by Hart (1992) as constituting a form of decoration and tokenism, i.e. children are either used as adornments for pre-set agendas or are only involved through pseudo-participation. Tokenism holds, at the core, a belief that the child participation methods and strategies currently employed and chosen by adults are adequate; however, the failure of some adult initiated programs and policies have proven that this is not always the case (Campbell et al., 2009; Gibbs et al. 2010). Under tokenism, the use of age and ability (charisma or eloquence), as preconditions for participation, is argued in the theory as undermining the interests of the youth (Hart 1992; Hart 2008: 21). This is a major concern in Zimbabwe where, apart from there being limited platforms for young people to be engaged, there is also no rapport, i.e. what Vygotsky (1978), Rogoff (1990) and Valsiner (2000) termed engagement with the more experienced members of the community. The risk of children and youth's participation being used for political leverage is therefore a risk that needs to be managed.

Participatory elements whereby children are given both functional and symbolic roles (assigned but informed), i.e. with the agenda predetermined by adults, are also represented in the model. Hart (1992: 8) argues that assuming a peripheral role may not result in the beneficiaries' ownership of the final product. Although the sixth rung is adult initiated, there is, however, shared decision making with children which is essential in development programs, i.e. it determines the level of support that a project will receive from community members (Strang and Meyer, 1993; Berten and Leisering, 2017). Hart (2008: 26) then outlines the need to include groups that may be excluded because of some special characteristic, including age and disability. The debate on youth being a homogenous group is an important one to consider when planning on inclusion strategies (Powers et al., 2014). In the preceding rungs (child initiated and directed) as well as the highest rung, there is a transition towards an environment which acknowledges young people as actors who are capable of making decisions and engaging in activities of their choice (Ofosu-Kus, 2017). There is therefore room to cooperate and flourish with an emphasis on decisions that are child initiated but shared with adults. This model reveals that in the ideal model for children, adults still have an active and crucial role to play. This model is therefore essential to this study as it provides a baseline to assess the participatory nature of structures in Zimbabwe as children and youth will be able to locate themselves within a particular rung.

7. Obstacles to youth participation

7.1 Preconditions for participation

Due to how the legal age of majority in Zimbabwe is 18 years of age, the study identified that those below 18 are often excluded from participation, i.e. the 15-17 age group. Disregarding young people's opinions on the premise that they are below the age of majority overlooks their evolving capacity in planning or participation, i.e. the democratic culture may not be fully developed when they reach the age of majority if it is not inculcated earlier. Kurtenbach and Pawelz (2015) concur and argue that youth participation should go beyond just voting every few years. Due to a myopic focus on voting, at the turn of 18 years of age, young people may have a limited understanding of their democratic duty and presume that casting a ballot is the only method of participation. Age restrictions, codified within law, can also encourage the exclusion of young people from participating in governance structures (Camino and Zeldin, 2002: 213), as is the case with age hierarchies in Ghana (Björnsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017 :288). Without the youth voice demanding accountability, a governance framework may prevail where public officials are unaccountable. Without being integrated within the democratic and governance structures at an early stage, young people are at the mercy of extremist groups that often advocate for violent protests or radical

modes of participation, which breed instability and threaten socioeconomic development.

Exclusion from participation by females because of their gender (Björnsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017: 288) was also noted in Ward 12. The FGDs revealed how the majority of the youth who are in VIDCOs are young males, a finding that validates the patriarchal nature of rural Zimbabwe with its associated repressiveness towards women (Schmidt, 1991; Gordon, 1994; Chiweshe et al., 2015). Furthermore, the revelation that the majority of the young males are relatives of the community leaders suggests nepotism as one of the issues impeding equitable participation in the VIDCOs. The findings also revealed how participating began initially through unofficial roles, e.g. as secretaries and note takers transcribing the proceedings of the meetings. Thereafter, the criteria used to select the youth who would become part and parcel of the committees were unclear. Apart from nepotism, the questionability of the selection criteria used to select youth representatives also poses a risk of creating an elite group, i.e. what Nairn et al. (2006: 257) argue as a selection process that is non-representative of the youth demography and is manipulated by adults. In the absence of mechanisms that allow youth to participate in selecting their representatives, the youth representatives on the committees risk rejection. In the area of study for instance, the elite group of selected youth representatives was at risk of rejection by the communal youth, amidst allegations that they were selected by adults.

7.2 Pseudo participation and exclusionary threats to participation

While the Zimbabwean Constitution has been progressive in providing for youth participation (as enshrined in Section 20 and 81 of the 2013 Constitution), establishing the effectiveness of VIDCOs and WADCOs as platforms for youth participation illuminates government responsiveness to the youth's concerns. Supportive legislation and policy, including the National Youth Policy and Transitional Stabilisation Program, provides a supportive legislative framework that helps ensure critical youth participation. Resultantly, the youth interviewed revealed their expectation for government to provide a conducive framework to enable their full participation. A 22-year-old male as well as a 26-year-old female gave the following responses during the FGDs:

Village Development Committees are headed by the old people who do not appear concerned about youth welfare.

These old people just want us as place holders and as secretaries but never take up our issues of concern.

The responses shared above are representative of the majority of sentiments aired during the FGDs with youths raising complaints of how they were often relegated to note taking and administrative (secretarial) functions within VIDCOs. This is substantiated by studies that identify failures in vertical top-down interventions as principally emanating from an inability to fully engage young people, with the terms, processes and settings of such engagements being determined by adults (Harris, 2006: 224; Augsberger et al., 2018: 44). Hart's (1992) Ladder of Child Participation discourages pseudo-participation and validates youth's conceptualisation of their participation as place holders (tokenism). The FGDs also revealed how even when their opinions were solicited, such inclusion was usually ceremonial, with no tangible efforts towards implementing issues that would have long been on the agenda. Consequently, young people in Ward 12 felt deterred from participating in local governance structures. Hart (1992), through what he terms 'decoration and tokenism', also identified such scenarios where youths are used as adornments of pre-set agendas.

The poor attendance of youths in bill hearings around the country was blamed by the civil society participants as emanating from exclusionary arrangements, i.e. the inconvenient time that the bill hearings were held (between 10am and 2pm during school days). This relegated the majority of youth to very peripheral roles in issues pertinent to their future, as they could not contribute to the bills (Hart, 1992: 8). Secondly, the holding of the bill hearings at centralized urban points further excluded rural youths from contributing, i.e. due to poverty they often lacked the requisite funds to travel. Hart (2008: 26) recognises the danger in exclusionary practices and outlines the need to include groups that may be excluded because of some special characteristic. Given how the bill hearings proceeded despite all these challenges that effectively excluded the majority of youth, participants lamented how the entire process seemed to be done to rubberstamp a course of action that they did not have an influence upon.

Other exclusionary threats to participation in Zimbabwe were discernible, for instance through how the Child Parliament allowed for only a single representative to be selected per constituency. This effectively excluded the majority of young people (Gwirayi and Shumba, 2011). According to Section 20 (1b) of the Zimbabwean Constitution, the State shall ensure youth have an opportunity to associate and be represented in political, social and economic life. This should be reflected in all governance institutions and governance structures available. However, the Child Parliament is neither ward based nor village based, thus limiting its reach and influence. Nairn et al. (2006: 257) argue that such bottlenecking or exclusionary practices amount to a compromise in participation.

8. Participatory structures: Operationalization challenges

8.1 Implementation gaps: Structural factors

Given how the discourse on grassroots democracy and participatory planning is shifting decision making from the exclusive domain of professional planners to inclusive community participation (Senbel, 2007: 455), foregrounding the experiences of civil society actors operating within Ward 12 was very important to the study. Camino and Zeldin (2002: 213) concur and view the inculcation of inclusive participation as a primary component of civil society's functions. However, in Ward 12, the study identified that the effectiveness of civil society was severely compromised by an existentially conflictive relationship between NGOs and government. Consequently, youth participation programs (by virtue of how they are a politically charged issue) were for the most part left at the mercy and behest of government. Subsequently, the state-initiated youth participation programs in Ward 12 have since failed to realise their intended goals with 'consultation devoid of feedback' being one of their biggest limitations (Agbakwa, 2002; Richter and Panday, 2007; Gaventa and Runciman, 2016; Hanlon et al., 2017).

Youth and child participation in Zimbabwe is also being deterred by a state failure to adopt and fully implement internationally recognized human rights instruments. These include the AU roadmap on the inclusion of youth in decision making (African Union, 2017: 9), the African Youth Charter (2006) Article 11(d), 11(b), 11 (e), and so forth. While Zimbabwe has ratified the majority of edicts on youth participation, civil society participants claimed that there was little effort from government officials to fully adopt such tenets. A manager of a local NGO operating within Masvingo Rural, said the following:

Zimbabwean leaders just sign and pledge to adopt instruments that they do not understand thereby limiting the full adoption of principles that underly such instruments.

In essence, just as seen elsewhere in other African states (Bottrell and Armstrong, 2007: 354; Björnsdóttir and Einarisdóttir, 2017: 290), while the Zimbabwean law allows for participatory platforms (Rural District Councils Act Chapter 29:13 and the Traditional Leaders Act Chapter 29:17), the political will from government to promote this participation appears to be missing.

The study's results also revealed that although the legislative arms of government were formulating progressive legislation, such policy reforms were being undermined by a failure to implement such edicts. Similar to the aforementioned

studies in Ghana, a disjuncture between policy formulation and implementation alienates the youth from critical engagement platforms (Björnsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017: 290). Interview participants argued that adequate implementation was stifled by government officials' limited knowledge of requisite conventions and laws governing youth participation. The Zimbabwean Constitution's silence on making qualifications mandatory to run for National Assembly, as well as the failure to make possession of prior knowledge of the country's laws or constitution a prerequisite when running for local authority, etc., have created many structural inefficiencies that have affected child and youth participation. Although councillors and policy makers should receive capacity building through local authorities and parliament, due to a shortage of funds, this training seldomly occur. Consequently, local authorities and parliamentarians have had to rely heavily on civil society partners to facilitate such training.

The monetary constraints stated above have also meant that youth participatory issues in Zimbabwe have received peripheral priority in the national fiscus. Youth participation in the country is governed by the Zimbabwe Youth Council and the Ministry of Youth, Sports, Arts and Recreation, a Ministry that has largely been underfunded with only \$53 million allocated from treasury for the entire 2019 programming year (shared between the Youth, Sports, Arts and Recreation functions). Although government has ascribed the paltry budget allocation to limited resources, this allocation can be challenged as a lack of political will to support youth participation and is partly rationalized by ideas that youth participatory platforms in rural areas are low cost or community based and do not always require funds. In the wake of poor funding, securing finances to fund programs that facilitate youth participation has left the Ministry of Youth with no other viable option but to solicit assistance from NGO partners (Bornstein, 2004; Sithole et al., 2013).

8.2 Political interference and generational or ideological conflicts

While the study focused on VIDCOs and WADCOs as independent structures, it discovered that political actors and institutions often interfere with the functioning of such structures, i.e. it discovered the politicization of governance structures. Although Section 281 of the Zimbabwean Constitution outlines that traditional leaders should not participate in partisan politics or violate the rights and freedoms of any person, there have been many incidents of traditional leaders pledging their allegiance to Zanu PF (Makahamadze et al., 2009). Young people also shared the opinion that the available participatory platforms were only there to facilitate bidding for the ruling party, an issue which calls for the prevention of such institutions from being an appendage of the ruling party.

The FGD participants revealed how seniors often used the name of the ruling political party youth wing to access resources at the expense of the youth league members. Alexander and McGregor (2013) identify this as a common strategy used by African political parties in exploiting local structures for political control, while limiting youth participation. Consequently the youths in Ward 12 were frustrated in their attempts to participate, with one 28-year-old former youth cell leader complaining that:

Through our party youth wing, we requested for chicks to start a youth poultry project but when the chicks were delivered, senior party members took these for their own use.

Such behaviour has alienated young people from the development discourse, as they are often used as a means to access resources by opportunistic party members. Youth's exclusion or impoverishment on the altar of political elite's self-enrichment has also been discernible in Senegal, Mali, Chad, etc. (Resnick and Thurlow, 2015; Hanlon et al., 2017). This also steers the discussion on youth participation towards patronage associated with political kinships. It is therefore fundamental to explore how political parties (as democratic and governance institutions) understand youth participation without romanticizing their role in a democracy. As an antithesis to their democratic mandate, political parties often disempower the youth demographic (Gaventa and Runciman, 2016).

Young people also outlined that they feel frustrated by the approach used by community leaders in addressing issues raised by members during the community meetings. Young people complained that adults often use baroque diction without directly addressing an issue. In contrast, young people directly address an issue without using elaborate diction and expect a straightforward response which adults do not often give. An example that was cited was on discussions of misappropriation of donated food items that occurred in the community. In elaborating on the issue, one male youth said:

These old people waste time in long talks without addressing the issue head on. A prominent community member diverted donated food items but when it was time to discuss the issue as a community, the community leaders failed to openly declare accusations against this community member.

The older community members would not directly address a community member who had misappropriated the donations whilst youth's confrontational approach presented a divergent methodology. Bottrell and Armstrong (2007) explore how cultural community practices, such as in this given scenario, may limit participation. The practice of African leaders preferring to address each other's

misdeemeanours in private, and not in public fora, limits the participatory governance synonymous with a democracy (Camino and Zeldin, 2002). Again, this points towards the rules of participation being a vertical or top-down pre-determined process by adults; the resultant programs then fall short of their mandate to engage young people (Harris, 2006: 224; Augsberger et al., 2018: 44). Youth therefore need to be involved in participatory governance because, apart from being citizens, they also possess the time, energy and enthusiasm to imagine a vastly more just future (Senbel, 2007: 459). As presented by Hart (1992), as a child initiated and directed model, this paper argues for such an arrangement where there is intergenerational dialogue in tackling the expectations of different demographic groups, i.e. what Carlson (2005: 221) terms youth and adult partnerships. Ofosu-Kus (2017) conceptualises this as an environment that acknowledges young people as actors who are capable of making decisions and engaging in activities of their choice.

9. Conclusion and recommendations: Future participation

Zimbabwe has committed to a devolution process through enhanced participation (outlined in Section 264 of the national constitution). Although this should involve a child and youth centered urban governance framework (UNICEF, 2012), urban planning in the country has been largely tokenistic without any meaningful consideration of children's issues. The enactment of the 1991 Local Government Code in the Philippines granted planning, financial and administrative autonomy to local government units which enabled local government to pursue pro-child urban governance. This could serve as a best practice for Zimbabwe as it seeks to decentralize government functions while promoting communities where young people have the right to manage their own affairs. However, it is crucial to note that political will is required to ensure that local government and communities fully enjoy their ability to self-determination.

Apart from a lack of political will, the segmented nature of service delivery also hinders equal participation, i.e. it is difficult to engage all the various service providers towards a unified promotion of youth participation. There is also a lack of coordination on service delivery within certain countries, which makes it difficult to find one body that can be strategically engaged to tackle youth exclusion. Zimbabwe's devolution process promises to decentralise service provisioning to local councils and local authorities thus providing an opportunity to have improved youth participation in local governance in line with the UNICEF (2012) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI). There is therefore a need to move beyond child friendly cities to child friendly communities which would encompass rural settings in Africa. Community-based institutions such as VIDCOs and WADCOs

thus have the capacity to open up the democratic space in such areas. For this to happen, there needs to be an appreciation of the cultural dynamics in rural communities as well as the existential reality of patriarchy. In establishing VIDCOs and WADCOs as mechanisms to facilitate meaningful participation for all young people, these realities need to be taken into consideration as they ultimately have a bearing on society's ability to fully democratize such participatory structures (Schmidt, 1991; Gordon, 1994; Chiweshe et al., 2015).

Given how some cultural elements go against liberal policies and participatory institutions, an open and inclusive approach that is not adult centric or male dominated needs to be developed. An open village or ward committee would be one where young people are free to express their views because even though the processes of engagement may be adult initiated, there can still be shared decision making with children (Strang and Meyer, 1993; Berten and Leisering, 2017). Supportive legislation and political will, to facilitate youth participation at the community level, will also be required and this can be done through adequate budgetary allocation for youth programs, training, etc. Carlson (2005: 221) argues that successful youth participation is determined by strong youth and adult partnerships, as well as the continual viewing of young people as resources in ongoing programs. Government therefore needs to commit to reengaging young people with a view to genuinely taking their issues into consideration, i.e. there is a need to ensure that young people's perspectives in the VIDCOs and WADCOs are considered, so that such structures effectively serve their function of ensuring citizen participation. In nurturing and developing a democratic culture, there is also a need for political will amongst adult actors to ensure that children and youth are involved in a peaceful manner. Available platforms have vast potential but need to be improved so that they are accepted by segments of the population that they are meant to serve.

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