



Service delivery challenges faced by Zimbabwean local Authorities: A revisit of the impact of the 2013 ministerial directive

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Abstract

This study was located within an interpretive paradigm and it adopted a mixed method approach which utilized both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the study, the researchers tackled the unprecedented ministerial directive which was issued in the year 2013 to all local authorities in Zimbabwe to write off debts in respect of rentals, unit tax, development levies, licenses and refuse charges owed by individual ratepayers including water and rates charges arrears which had accrued to all residential properties over the period February 2009 to June 30, 2013. It appears the ministerial directive was the first of its kind in over a century old history of local governance in Zimbabwe. It is the unique nature of the directive which has motivated the researchers to study its impact on service delivery and lessons thereof for the future. Thus this study set out to explore the impact of this unprecedented directive on the abilities of local authorities to continue offering quality services to residents. The study was basically a case study of the City of Victoria Falls (CVF) in the interest of time. The study used a sample of one hundred (100) CVF ratepayers selected using stratified random sampling. In addition all the fifteen (15) managers of the municipality were used in the study. The primary instrument used to collect data was the self-administered questionnaire supplemented by the structured and unstructured interview guides. The research adopted a mixed method approach which utilizes both quantitative and qualitative approach. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics. Analysis of qualitative data involved a special set of interpretive practices and narrative techniques. The evidence from this study suggests that the major beneficiaries of the directive were ratepayers and Zanu PF as an election contestant. The study identified local authorities as major losers as they were adversely affected financially by the directive. The impact has been felt over a period of almost ten (10) years. In addition the study showed that the directive created huge debts for local authorities leading to their failure to meet their financial obligations in a period of almost ten (10) years which include failure to offer quality services. The study advanced a view that for local authorities to avoid being victims of such political directives in future they should intensify their revenue collection efforts which include offering prepaid services.

Keywords: ratepayers, rates, arrears, ministerial directive, local authority, bills, residents

1. Introduction

Muzvidziwa (2010) summarises the economic challenges which bedeviled Zimbabwe from around the year 2000 to about 2009 when the country adopted the multi-currency regime. In this regard Muzvidziwa (2000) aptly observes that the Zimbabwean economy was on a free fall. Consequently the country lost its status as the bread basket of Africa during the said period. The hyper-inflationary environment obtaining over the aforementioned period was deemed to be the highest in the world exceeding two million percent (Muzvidziwa 2010).

The direct impact of this hyper-inflationary environment was that the country slipped down to become one of the lowest ranked economies in the world. The economic crisis hit hard all sectors of the economy including local authorities. Local authorities eventually found themselves incapacitated to efficiently provide meaningful service delivery to their ratepayers. However, dollarization of the economy brought some relative stability. Dollarization was adopted in January 2009 at the height of Zimbabwe's economic crisis (Mudzidziwa 2010). Schuler (2005) defines dollarization as a situation where a country has no locally issued currency and thus officially utilizes foreign currency instead, although the currency need not be specifically the US Dollar.

As the local authorities were starting to rebuild capacity lost during the hyper-inflation period the government through the ministry of local government brewed a great shocker. In an unprecedented move, on July 23, year 2013 the Minister of Local Government, Urban and Rural Development Dr Ignatius Chombo issued a directive to all local authorities in the country to write off all debts relating to all residential properties which had accrued over the period February 1, 2009 to June 30, 2013.

The directive shocked all local authorities in the country but they had no choice but to implement the directive. In his directive the minister argued elegantly and persuasively that the economy had not been operating optimally in the process relentlessly unleashing severe hardships on the citizenry. Thus from 2009, the ratepayers have not been able to meet their obligations in terms of payment of taxes, rentals, levies and related charges resulting in an enormous and crippling debt burden frustrating the majority of the population. The minister went on to state that for avoidance of doubt, the directive was meant to cushion individual ratepayers from severe effects of the economic challenges experienced during the period in question.

The directive covered writing off all debts relating to water and rates charges arrears which had accrued to all residential properties over the aforementioned period. This ministerial directive was purported to be premised on the provisions of section 133 of the Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:15) as read with section 303 of the Urban Councils Act (29:15). The directive was made through a letter date July 23, year 2013. The researchers doubt that the actions of the minister were the correct interpretation of the various legislations he cited. According to Urban Councils Act Chapter 29:15 Section 303, a council may write off amounts, excluding rates, owing to the council by any person if;

- a. The council considers that such amounts are irrecoverable, or
- b. In the opinion of the council the difficulties, disadvantages or costs of collection thereof outweigh the value thereof

It would appear the 2013 ministerial directive was the first of its kind in over a century old history of legislated local governance in Zimbabwe. It was the unique nature of the directive which motivated the researchers to study its impact and lessons thereof for the future.

Operations of local authorities in Zimbabwe is guided by the country's constitution at Chapter 14 as read with the Urban Council's Act (Chapter 29:13) and Rural District Council's Act (Chapter 29:15). The two Acts are currently administered by the Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing (Local Government, Urban and Rural

Development as it was called in 2013). The allocation to ministries, administration of various Acts of parliament in the country is the prerogative of the President which makes it a political directed process. Jonga (2014) correctly observes that Zimbabwe was a British colony and its local authority system reflects the English colonial legacy. The Urban Councils Act is used to guide operations of urban local authorities while the Rural District Councils Act guides operations of rural local authorities. The study in addition sought to explore if the two Acts which guide operations of local authorities and any of their predecessor Acts and Ordinances were designed in such a way as to fulfill the political ambitions of the rulers of the day as opposed to efficient local governance and efficient service delivery to ratepayers.

This study is presented in four main sections. The first section drawing from literature, unpacks the genesis of local governance in Zimbabwe. The second section focuses on the theoretical frameworks. The third part briefly presents the study methodology while the fourth part deals the results of the study.

2. Research Questions

This descriptive survey research was premised on the following key research questions:

- Was the ministerial directive politically motivated or otherwise?
- What was the impact of the directive to local authorities?
- What were the benefits of the ministerial directive to ratepayers?
- What strategies can be applied by local authorities to encourage residents to pay their water and. rates bills on time in future?

3. Theoretical Framework

Chatiza (2010) point out that legislated urban local government in Zimbabwe dates back to the time of colonization in 1890s. In this regard Chatiza (2010) further observes that the arrival of white colonial settlers in the 1890s saw the sprouting of urban centres in various parts of the country marking the beginning of the use of local governance as a political weapon by the ruling white elites at the time. In agreement Mukoyi (2021) ^[17] aptly observes that colonization of Zimbabwe began with the occupation of the land by the British South African Company (BSAC) with the permission from the British government. To consolidate its conquests, the BSAC began by dismantling the pre-colonial traditional local governance structures of the Ndebele and Shona Kingdoms (Mukoyi 2021) ^[17]. In the same vein Muchadenyika and Williams (2016) ^[18] note that the main purpose of local governance under the BSAC was to separate the development of races, with whites minority rulers benefiting more than the subjugated majority blacks. Various councils were established during this period to provide efficient services to the white community. A position which is collaborated by Mai (1996) ^[6]; Mapuva (2012) ^[7] and Kurebwa (2015) ^[5] when they point out that colonial local governance was characterized by the political exclusion of black people from local governance.

DeVisser, Steytler and Machingauta (2000) recognise that the first known urban local government came into effect in 1891 when the Board of Management was established to run the emerging town of Salisbury (City of Harare as it is known today). The Board of Management was composed of four

elected members and three members appointed by the British South Africa Company (BSAC). It is clear that right from the word go local government was a political creature as the three members of the Board of management appointed by the BSAC represented the political interests of the day.

The Board of Management was succeeded by the Sanitary Board in 1892. The Town Management Ordinance of 1894 gave legal effect to Sanitary Boards which were established in the main towns and the Municipal Ordinance of 1897 granted municipality status to Salisbury and Bulawayo, with wholly elected councils (De Visser *et al* 2010; Ncube 2011; Kurebwa 2015; Mukoyi 2021) ^[17, 5]. As urban local government was developing during the colonial times it excluded Africans. The exclusion of Africans was defining the political thinking of the day. Successive pieces of legislation continued with the political agenda of the time to deny Africans a say in the governance of cities and towns (Mai 1996; Ncube 2011; Mapuva 2012; Kurebwa 2015; Muchadenyika and Williams 2016; Mukoyi 2021) ^[17, 18, 6, 7, 5]. Urban councils which were established during this period in urban areas where the Europeans lived had authority to raise their own revenues, to elect council officials and enact bylaws. This privilege was never extended to African based councils such as Natives Councils which heavily depended on the central white minority led government for financing and authority (Ncube 2011; Mapuva 2012, and Mukoyi 2021) ^[17, 7]. The kind of local governance which was practiced ensured it fulfilled the political dynamics of the time which was to ensure white superiority over blacks.

Mbetu (1997; Kurebwa 2015 and Muchadenyika & Williams 2016) ^[18, 5, 12] all point out that some attempts to include the growing African urban population in urban local government were made through the establishment of Advisory Boards. They further, observe that as this name suggests, these could only advise white officers on the concerns of Africans in townships.

The post 1980 period saw significant changes taking place in local governance with the attainment of independence. Townships became part of the urban councils, and blacks could now vote, and be voted in as councillors and mayors (Ncube 2011; Kurebwa 2015 and Mukoyi 2021) ^[17, 5]. These changes witnessed from 1980 going forward represented the changed political situation and thinking as brought by the attainment of country's independence from Britain. The history of the development of local governance in Zimbabwe was clearly influenced by legislations whose aims were to fulfill the political ambitions of the rulers of the day. The question would be: is political consideration still playing a role in local governance in Zimbabwe to this day? Leading to a further question: Was the 2013 ministerial directive to local authorities rationale or was political directed?

3.1 The growth of political directed local government and highlights of relevant law reform in Zimbabwe

The system of local government as it is obtaining today in Zimbabwe is defined by the country's constitution at Chapter 14 (from 2013) as read with both the Urban Councils Act and the Rural District Councils Act. But its various stages of development can be traced to over a century ago. A closer examination of these three pieces of legislation shows that they were designed to remove the old racial political order in local governance to create a new political order of non-racial designed local government system. According to Chatiza (2010) the history of formal local government in Zimbabwe

is generally traced back to the arrival of the British South Africa Company (BSAC) in 1890. Chatiza's approach completely ignores the traditional system of local government which existed prior to 1890 where the King delegated the administration of various regiments under his indunas (chiefs). It is clear in his presentation he is referring to the modern system of local government as defined by pieces of legislation. However, it is a truism that local governance institutions that existed before 1890 deserve recognition and classification as forms of local government. The views of Chatiza (2010) seem like they do not recognize that local governance might be as old as the growth of human numbers on earth.

Chatiza (2010) goes on to highlight that there are two points of views regarding when to begin the story of local government in Zimbabwe and these are not necessarily opposed. They provide insights into the conception of local government in the country from both a central and a local perspective. There is no doubt that Chatiza (2010) decided to tell his story of local governance development genesis from the colonial period. Chatiza (2010) and other likeminded researchers might have decided to begin from the colonial period because the system of local government which operated from then going forward was defined by some written legislation of some sort as opposed to that of Kings which was based on unwritten traditions. What should be noted with both systems of local government as represented by the traditional order and legislated order is that they did reflect the political interests of rulers. Scholars tend to prefer some documented references for the benefit of their readers to also investigate further by also referring to those written records.

On the same note, Helmsing, *et al.* (1991) state that changes in policy and law are a useful framework to use in tracing the history of local government. This approach by Helmsing *et al* (1991) also tend to follow the approach adopted by Chatiza (2010) who tend to make reference to documented records. They trace the history of local government from the time it started to be defined by legislation. However, this approach is helpful for the student of local government who tend to have a base of using to define the genesis of modern local government. This is because these capture the essence, structures and functions of local government.

De Visser, Steytlerland and Machingauta (2010) ^[1] explain that the first formally established local authority in Zimbabwe was the Salisbury Sanitary Board in 1891. Again De Visser *et al* (2010)) tend to adopt the same approach adopted by other scholars cited above. However, the researchers believe that local governance can be traced back to before colonial times as history proves that Great Zimbabwe, Khami and Dlodlo were the first urban centres in Zimbabwe their difference with Salisbury is that they were not established using a written law but established through traditions. However, De Visser *et al* (2010) note that the necessary legal instrument establishing Salisbury Sanitary Board was only enacted in 1894 (Ordinance 2) followed by Municipal Law of 1897.

Hlatshwayo (1998) interprets the time lag or delay between the establishment of the Salisbury Sanitary Board and Ordinance 2 as an indication that local governance was established grudgingly. According to Hlatshwayo (1998) in rural areas the creation of Gwai and Shangani 'reserves' under the Matabeleland Order in Council of 1894 signified the beginnings of the colonial segregated system of local

government. Hlatshwayo (1998) further notes that subsequent orders, legislations and commissions entrenched white expropriation of African lands till the 1930 Land Apportionment Act, shaping the development of separated local government in the process. It is clear that up to this stage all the pieces of legislation defining and shaping local governance reflected the political interests of white rulers.

In agreement with other researchers cited above, Mai (1996)^[6] contends that urban and rural areas were divided and development pursued in ways that at the same time subjugated African interests or ambitions and were managed by structures dominated by privileged groups. For instance, the 1973 Urban Councils Act provided for the control of African Townships by rate paying whites, coloureds and Asians. On the same subject, Mbetu (1997)^[12] notes that between 1940 and 1970 Advisory Boards' were established in African Townships with a purely consultative role. While in non-African areas within municipal areas, like Harare (Salisbury), smaller local authorities, invariably known as Area and Town Management Boards, were established. Most of these were incorporated in 1972 before the enactment of the 1973 Urban Councils Act.

3.2 Local government's developmental roles

Historically local governance has played a critical role in the transformation of countries the world over and continue to play an important role in economic development of both developed and developing countries According to Ola (2007)^[20] the idea and practice of localizing government is a universal and age-old phenomenon. In this regard Ola (2007)^[20] appropriately observes that the philosophy of localizing governance in modern day setting as most scholars argue is anchored on the need to bring government closer to the communities. In this regard bringing government closer to the communities means that local authorities are then given power and autonomy to deliver a wide range of services in their jurisdictional areas with an objective of making local areas, towns and cities attractive places to live, work and invest in.

Mararike (1995)^[10] is of the view that before and after independence, councils were used to transform and/or 'develop' Zimbabwean society. Mararike (1995)^[10] goes on to indicate that this role was, therefore, a historical one, although the outcomes of such transformation had always fallen below public expectations. However, Moyana (1984)^[14] seems worried in that councils have progressively failed to effectively govern and develop their areas. Moyana (1984)^[14] concludes that councils can and should perform better in this role is not in doubt. Debate rages on whether the constraints to such transformative potential reside within individual councils, the whole sector, central government, or in society. Mararike (1995)^[10] believes that it is true that all factors hold true to varying degrees, and depending on a council, council type (rural or urban, new or old in terms of establishment), political culture, and resource endowment.

Based on the above views it becomes crystal clear that local authorities are the closest and locally accountable and accessible public institutions, with a role to represent local interests and deliver locally relevant services. From residents' point of view, meeting community welfare needs and facilitating local economic development are essential municipal functions critical to development. However, Frost and Thomson (2010) concluded that the potential of local authorities is considerable but is presently not fully tapped.

In Zimbabwe's case, local authorities can also become more effective than currently in terms of monitoring and coordinating the work of other development organisations. This, as noted by Chatiza (2010), can be through providing relevant information to their residents and implementing organisations to allow effective participation in development activities.

Chatiza (2010) goes on to state that local authorities also have a role in facilitating community organisation. Good examples include, facilitating the formation of, and access to, land for housing co-operatives that was done by relevant departments in the Municipalities of Harare and Bulawayo, among other councils. Urban and rural councillors are also regularly involved in convening community meetings in their wards that are critical to development facilitation (Tendler, 1997)^[21]. On the same note, Hulme and Edwards (2011) note that the transition from Zimbabwe dollars to other currencies was not accompanied by any studies on the cost of services in foreign currency, especially a study comparing with the region. With very little revenue collections many local authorities had to revise their budgets downwards.

To this end up to the end of July 2009, the City of Victoria Falls had only collected USD1 184 096 out of target of USD5 771 234. The Municipality resolved to reduce its budget by 50% and hope that residents would respond (CFV Full Council meeting minutes of end of August 2009). Based on the low revenue collection rate as experienced by most local authorities the researchers are compelled to accept the argument that most people are now in informal employment earning not more than USD150 per month. The result of this desperate economic situation is that most residents find themselves in arrears due to their informal employment status relegating payment of council charges to the peripheral. As a result local authorities need to be more realistic and innovative in their future budgets if inflows are to improve.

All the above cited authorities seem to agree, that a major challenge faced by all local authorities, urban and rural, and City Victoria Falls included, is timeous billing. As a result bills come late after residents have spent their meagre resources on more pressing needs. In addition to challenges presented by late billing for services Mhlahlo (2007)^[13] also observes that many councils' revenue halls where payments are made are not user friendly. According to Mhlahlo (2007)^[13] residents stand in long and winding queues for hours on end with one or two counters operational. Mhlahlo (2007)^[13] believes these long and winding queues in councils revenue halls force some residents to give up and go home with their money, never to return, as the money will be spent on other commitments. It will appear to deal with the issue of long, winding and frustrating queues; councils need to implement two simple management techniques: organisation and supervision.

Makumbe (1998)^[8] observes that local government, as the level closest to the people, has a higher visibility than the more remote central government. He goes on to state that its performance has a direct bearing on the quality of life of local people. Thus that failure of local government to provide quality services has an immediate direct impact on people. In this regard Mhlahlo (2007)^[13] notes that clinics without drugs, pot-holed roads, erratic water supplies, burst sewer pipes, uncollected garbage, and non-functional street lights have immediate impact on the well-being of inhabitants. Mhlahlo (2007)^[13] further explains that this is the state of affairs in all the 92 local governments in Zimbabwe.

However, for many years, the local government system in Zimbabwe and its performance was the envy of many countries, with Harare dubbed the 'Sunshine City'. The local government system was robust, largely self-financing, and functional. In the late 1990s, Urban Councils were being credit rated by international financial institutions to enable them to get to the stage where development finance could be secured from financial institution, freeing them from reliance on ratepayers and central government.

Zacks-Willaims (2012) indicates that lessons had been learnt from the Urban 1 and 11 Programmes co-funded by the World Bank and the Government of Zimbabwe, indicating the viability and sustainability of capital markets as a source of infrastructural development finance. Capacity building efforts through the Rural District Council capacity building programme, pursuing learning by doing approach', were in full swing in the 1990s. Zacks-Willaims (2012) asserts that under this programme, the focus was on capacitating institutions, developing human resources and capital projects. The decentralisation effort was riding on the back of this capacity building programme. Resources from international development partners and donor agencies were available to support these efforts (Government of Zimbabwe, 2004). The drying up of financing from the international donor community saw a gradual decline in effort on all fronts after 2000. The worsening macro-economic climate characterized by hyperinflation, shortage of foreign currency, high interest rates, dwindling national fiscus and accompanying brain drain resulted in the further decline in local government's capacity to deliver. Yoshikuni (2006)^[22] rightly suggests that it is this decline of service provision capacity and decaying infrastructure which local government institutions need to tackle.

3.3. Central government revenue contribution to support local authorities in service delivery

De Visser *et al* (2010) state that, the improving national environment has brought with it positive signs of support for the country. Some inflows are being experienced making it possible for Treasury to disburse some funds to resuscitate collapsed services. In the same vein Muleya (2011)^[16] believes that water and sanitation is one such area. The Victoria Falls Newsletter, 2012 notes that Local governments are getting some assistance with Harare having got about USD 17 million and Victoria Falls got USD93 000. Muleya (2012) gives a word of advice where she says that these transfers have to be utilised and accounted for properly. De Visser, *et al* (2010) also believes that proper tender procedures have to be followed.

The position taken by De Visser *et al* (2010) agree with the argument given by Makumbe (1998)^[8] who states that the Municipal Procurement Board should be involved in local authorities procurement processes since it is very easy for corruption to occur. Officials should realise the suffering that people are experiencing, and operate professionally. In support of the need for care in procurement Muleya (2011)^[16] asserts that senior managers should ensure systems are in place and that they are strictly adhered to. The coming in of the new constitution in August 2013 has ushered in a new era in terms of sources of funds for municipalities. Section 301 stipulates that funds should be allocated to the three spheres of government as now provided in the constitution.

3.4 Positive impacts of the write-offs

The directive by Government that all the 92 rural and urban local authorities should write-off debts owed by residents for rates and water bills from February 2009 to 30 June 2013 came as a great relief to residents, many of whom were on the verge of losing their houses and other valuable properties (The Chronicle of September 14 2013). The Minister argued that Government's directive followed complaints by residents associations over arrears caused by unjustified increases in rates and bills by MDC led councils especially in urban areas (www.Herald.co.zw/municipalities-write-off-bills).

The Minister further contended that while Government acknowledged that residents should pay their bills for the sustenance of effective and efficient service delivery, economic sanctions had made it difficult for the generality of the citizenry to meet their obligations. In his further arguments the Minister states that "since our migration from the Zimbabwean dollar era to the multi-currency regime in February 2009, the residents have by and large failed to pay their dues to Councils and have accumulated huge debts which have become intractable" (www.herald.co.zw/municipalities-write-off-bills). The website www.vopzimbabwe.com/government-direct-localauthorities-towrite-off-bills quoted Bongani Ncube, a resident of Victoria Falls who applauding the government action that,

"we want to appreciated the Government's move which, as already stated, will bring relief to residents who were finding it difficult if not impossible to clear their arrears to service providers such as Councils". The comments by Bongani Ncube clearly shows residents were totally in agreement and happy with the ministerial directive at the time. Whether they understood its financial impact to local authorities on service delivery was something else.

According to The Chronicle of July 24, 2013 many councils including Bulawayo City Council had resorted to auctioning residents' household property and in some extreme cases houses in order to recover money owed. In Bulawayo almost every week council was auctioning residents' household properties to recover money owed. The auctioning of property of residents as a way of recovering money owed for rates and other services was further worsening the plight of residents whose only way out was to appeal to government for protection through their residents associations. It would appear the methodology local authorities used to recover money owed by residents were the ones which invited government intervention. No responsible government will ignore the cry of its citizens especially when the concerned citizens were being denied a basic right like shelter.

According to the website www.voazimbabwe.com, another resident of Victoria Falls, Nobesuthu Mhlanga, also acknowledged that it seemed councils were no longer sensitive to the plight of their residents and she want to believe this had prompted Government to intervene. Mhlanga agreed that it is a fact that most of the residents have lost employment as a result of the economic challenges facing the country and the hardest hit was Bulawayo where an estimated 20 000 workers lost their jobs following closure of many companies in the city. In the same interview Mhlanga went much further and reiterated that: "Many of these workers who lost jobs are the ones that are supposed to pay rates, water and other service charges to Councils hence the high default rate being recorded by many types of council."

Mhlanga went on to argue that many families are finding it difficult to meet even the basics such as food, clothing, school fees and rentals as most bread winners are out of employment. Many have been forced to turn to the informal sector where they are trying to eke a living from buying and selling goods. The competition is, however, very stiff in this sector given the number of people involved and as such not much can be realised as profits. In the same interview with the VOA Zimbabwe Mhlanga admitted that as residents they were cognisant of the fact that the Government's move is going to hit hard most of councils given the fact that many of them were already facing cash flow challenges.

3.5 Negative Impact of write-offs

In his directive the Minister acknowledged that the directive will have a negative impact on local authorities, thus he advised them to cut off luxuries and also, cut down their out of the economic realities salaries which were being paid by local authorities. According to The Newsday of August 30, 2013 Chitungwiza residents have appealed to government to quickly intervene to ease water woes that have worsened after the scrapping of bills early that month. The paper reported that, before the government directive to all local authorities to write-off water bills in June, Chitungwiza residents used to have running water in their taps twice a week, but now the situation has worsened, raising fears of a cholera outbreak. So dire is the situation that some residents are resorting to shallow wells for water while others are spending their productive hours in queues for the precious liquid at the few boreholes drilled by the local MPs using the Constituency Development Fund.

The Newsday further refers to an interview they had with a Chitungwiza resident Grace Chinake, who is reported to have told the paper that, since residents received their July bills which showed that their water bills had been scrapped, their taps immediately ran dry and they had to rely on boreholes for water.

On the 5th August 2013, the Daily News witnessed long winding queues of mainly women and children scrounging for water in dug out wells, streams and at the limited boreholes. In an interview with the Daily News of August 6, 2013, Otillia Mutsvunguma, a high school teacher, said the situation will be worsened with schools which are about to open. Chitungwiza receives water from Harare, but the country's capital has failed to regularly pump water to the dormitory town owing to a myriad of challenges. This has been made worse by the dormitory town's failure to pay for water supplied by Harare which in turn has resorted to throttle supplies to force payment.

The Herald of October 30, 2013, reported that the Harare City Council claims that it is now sitting on a \$200 million debt following a government directive in July this year to write off outstanding ratepayers' bills. According to the Combined Harare Residents Association, and City Council Treasurer, Mr Misheck Mubvumbi, told a residents' meeting that although residents' bills were currently at zero, many people have stopped paying their rates following the implementation of the government directive. Mr Mubvumbi went on to highlight that as of September 30th, 2013 the Harare City Council had accumulated an estimated \$200 million debt as it can no longer meet its own financial obligations. However, the Harare City councillors said they were unable to comment until a meeting expected to follow up on the debt Harare has accumulated since the implementation of the government

directive to write-off debts back dating to 2009. Precious Shumba, coordinator of the Harare Residents Trust, is reported by the Newsday as having said there was now confusion over payment of rates in the city.

The Harare City Council has revealed it is already over \$200 million in debt, following a Ministerial directive in July to write off outstanding rate bills owed by ratepayers. The Council's Treasurer Misheck Mubvumbi revealed on 27th August 2013 during a budget consultative meeting that the amount owed by ratepayers was "at zero" after the directive to scrap debts, a move widely criticised as a vote buying exercise by ZANU PF (Herald 29 October 2013).

According to Mr Mubvumbi, ratepayers, including residents and the industrial and commercial sector, have not resumed paying their rates, leading to a debt build-up to over \$200 million by 30th September 2013. The Newsday newspaper reported that the Council's debt as of September 30th was made up of \$40, 1 million owed by residents, \$130 million owned by the industrial and commercial sector, while the government owed \$42 million. According to Mr Mubvumbi, the debt accumulation in Harare can be directly related to the ministerial directive as more and more residents after the write off are no longer coming forward to pay their bills/ rates hoping for a future directive. We have made it clear that if they do not pay we are going to take stringent measures by way of summons going forward. Debts had become manageable because they had been written off and we expect people to be paying their rates, but it's astonishing that so much debt has accrued over the space of a few months (Newsday 1 October 2013).

"We wrote off that debt in July and people were now at zero debt. The assumption was that now people are going to easily manage to pay their bills, Mr Mubvumbi told SW Radio Africa

4. Methodology

This study was located within an interpretive paradigm and it adopted a mixed method approach which utilizes both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This mixed method approach was influenced by the primary objective of the study which was to explore the impact of the ministerial directive on the abilities of local authorities to continue providing quality services after being forced to cancel all water and rates charges. This research was basically a case study located within the City of Victoria Falls.

Adopting both qualitative and quantitative approaches to generate answers to the primary objective, the study used a sample of one hundred (100) ratepayers from a population of eight thousand (8000) households of the City of Victoria Falls together with all the fifteen (15) managers of the municipality. The researchers chose to use the mixed method approach as they felt it was the best methodology given the extent of the requirements of the research topic. The primary instrument used to collect data was the self-administered questionnaire, which was supplemented by the structured and unstructured interview guides. The self-administered questionnaire was used to generate primarily quantitative data as it contained closed ended questions only. While both the structured and unstructured interview guides were used to generate exclusively qualitative data as they contained open ended questions. The structured and unstructured interviews were conducted face to face. All interviews were audio recorded.

The sample was selected using stratified random sampling.

The study preferred stratified random sampling in this case because the researchers considered CVF residents as heterogeneous. They differed according to the type of suburb they live in and income. According to the CVF places of residents are categorized as high density, medium density and low density. Thus those who live in high density suburbs are low income earners, middle density dwellers are middle income earners while those who reside in low density areas are high income earners. Rates charges also differ according to this classification.

Table 1: Classification of CVF residents by residential areas

Type Of Residential Area	Population	Sample	Actual
High Density	6000	40	30
Medium Density	1200	35	21
Low Density	800	25	14
Total	8000	100	65

Table 1 shows how sampling was done taking into account of the heterogeneity of CVF residents based on the type of residential area they were residing at and income earned.

4.1 Data analysis and interpretation procedures

The presentation and analysis of data was unquestionably a complex process especially presentation and analysis of qualitative data. It involved inductive analysis of data where critical themes were expected to emerge from the data. The analysis of data from structured and unstructured interview guides involved a special set of interpretive practices and narrative techniques. It involve re organizing the data and breaking it into manageable and easy to manipulate units in the process identifying common patterns. This process enabled the researchers to discover important ideas and in the process extracting what to report.

Quantitative data collected through the use of self-administered questionnaire was presented and analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics assisted the researchers to reduce a body of raw data into tables and graphs so that facts would be easily interpreted. Constant comparative analysis of data was used in the

analysis of data to establish emerging themes. In the end different data analysis strategies were applied to strengthen the study and improve the validity of the results.

4.2 Response rate

Out of a total of one hundred (100) questionnaires sent out to ratepayers sixty-five (65) were completed and returned. All the fifteen CVF managers completed and returned the self-administered questionnaires. The response rate was therefore sixty-five percent (65%) and hundred percent (100%) for ratepayers and CVF managers respectively. Out of the sixty-five who completed the quantitative questionnaire the researchers conveniently picked 18 to participate in face to face interviews while all the 15 CVF managers also participated on the face to face interviews. This study emerged from the application of the questionnaire which was supplemented by the structured and unstructured interview guides

5. Results of the study

5.1 Was the directive politically motivated or otherwise?

Data analysis of qualitative and quantitative responses revealed that both ratepayers and CVF managers believed that the directive was politically motivated intended to achieve political ambitions of ZANU PF as a 2013, 2018 and future general elections contestant. ZANU PF was the political party in which the minister was a senior member of and the party’s House of Assembly candidate for Zvimba North constituent in the 2013 parliamentary elections. The study also observed that this was one of the few issues where the ratepayers and the CVF managers agreed. Thus the study concluded the directive was part of the ZANU PF’s 2013, 2018 and future general elections campaign strategy. These results seem also to be concurring with what was revealed in literature that local governance in Zimbabwe has always been used to achieve political ambitions of those in power at the time (Mbetu1997; Hlatshwayo 1998; De Visser *et al* 2010; Chatiza 2010 Ncube 2011; Mapuva 2012; Kurebwa 2015; Mukoyi 2021) ^[17, 7, 5, 12]. Quantitative responses are as depicted in table 1 below.

Table 1: Motive of the ministerial directive to all local authorities

Motive of the directive	Strongly Degree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly disagree		Total	
	Mgr	RP	Mgr	RP	Mgr	RP	Mgr	RP	Mgr	RP	Mgr	RP
The directive was in the best interest of residents	0	22	0	29	0	12	15	20	85	17	100	100
Writing off of debts was a good development	6	25	26	31	6	18	31	14	31	12	100	100
The directive was meant to attain political ambitions of ZANU PF	44	42	25	15	25	18	6	20	0	5	100	100
The minister was not the right authority to issue the directive therefore rendering the directive political	15	13	25	15	20	35	5	31	35	6	100	100
The directive had no basis, it was arbitrary, irrational and unjustifiable.	50	7	25	28	19	25	6	25	0	15	100	100
The directive was a right decision but wrongly timed	7	26	5	30	12	14	45	17	31	13	100	100

The quantitative results as presented in table 1 show that 69% and 57% of CVF managers and ratepayers respectively reported that indeed the directive was political motivated. These responses were further confirmed though in-depth interviews of both ratepayers and CVF managers. The results from analysis of qualitative data further revealed that both residents and CVF managers were in agreement that the directive had no basis; it was arbitrary, irrational and unjustifiable. Analysis of quantitative responses also showed that both CVF managers and ratepayers rejected the notion

that municipality charges were unaffordable and therefore over burdening the poor. In addition the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data proved that the directive was very unpopular with CVF managers as they seem to completely fail to pick one positive development from it.

5.2 What was the impact of the directive to local authorities?

Qualitative data analysis from residents revealed that writing off debts was a good development that provided relief to

struggling residents although local authority managers completely rejected this as benefit to ratepayers. They argued the impact of failure by local authorities to deliver services will be felt for many years to come. They felt the long term effects far outweighed the immediate benefits to residents. The analysis of qualitative data from the responses of managers also showed that it was not true that local authorities were unnecessarily maintaining bad debts in their books. In addition the study observed that the ministerial directive would encourage residents not to pay their bills in future hoping a similar directive will be issued towards elections. Evidence from the study also showed that the ministerial directive was a wrong decision which had huge

negative financial implications on local authorities with a long term impact which has persisted for about ten (10) years. The wrong decision has lived with local authority for almost ten (10) years. The decision has impacted heavily on their ability to delivery services to residents the last nine (9) years. The study further observed that residents started accumulating arrears immediately after the writing off the debts. In so much so that in about three years their debts had ballooned and at the time of this study most of residents were in worse off debt compared to what they were in June 2013 after the writing off of the debts. The results from quantitative responses are as presented in table 2

Table 2: The impact of the directive to local authorities

	Strongly Degree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly disagree		Total	
	Mgr	RP	Mgr	RP	Mgr	RP	Mgr	RP	Mgr	RP	Mgr	RP
Directive plugged the local authorities into huge debt leading to failure to meet their obligations	75		25		0		0				100	100
Directive had huge negative financial implications on local authorities	50		50		0		0		0		100	100
Writing off of debts meant that local authorities lost huge potential revenues	54		34		6		6		0		100	100

The results as depicted in table 2 show that all CVF managers believed the directive in its blanket form plunged local authorities into huge debt leading to their complete failure to meet their financial obligations which included payment of salaries and for raw water to Zimbabwe National Water Authority this impact has been felt for over nine years since the directive was implemented. In addition the results revealed that the loss was not only restricted to the historic accumulated debt but also potential future revenues. Thus the directive had a long term negative financial implications on local authorities.

residents all of sudden found themselves debt free. On the other hand the CVF managers felt that the directive was not in the interest of ratepayers as they are ones who are directly affected by poor service delivery. According the CVF managers residents have lived with poor service delivery for the last nine years. This view of the CVF managers was clearly stated from both quantitative responses and qualitative responses. The quantitative conflicting views of ratepayers and CVF managers are shown in tables 3 and 4 below.

5.3 What were the benefits of the ministerial directive to ratepayers?

Data analysis revealed that the major beneficiaries of the directive were residents (despite this benefit having been short term) and ZANU PF as an election contestant and local authorities were major losers. Local authorities were adversely affected by the implementation of the directive up to the time of this study nine years later. It created huge debts leading to their failure to meet their financial obligations over a period of nine years.

Table 3: Views of residents on whether the directive was a good development

SA	16	25
A	20	31
N	12	18
DA	9	14
SDA	8	12
Total	65	100

Table 4: Views of CVF executives on whether the directive was a good development

SA	1	6
A	4	26
N	1	6
DA	5	31
SDA	5	31
Total	16	100

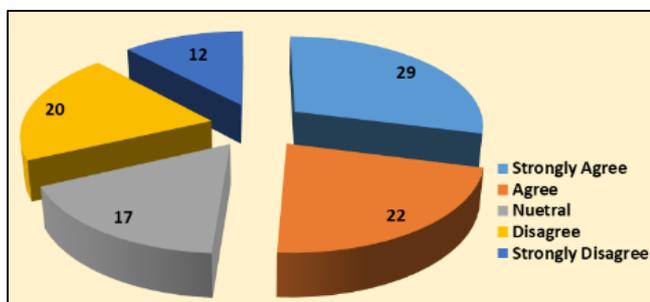


Fig 1: Views of residents on whether the directive was in their best interest

Figure 1 above shows that 51% of ratepayers felt that the directive was in their best interest. This was equal reinforced by their responses given in the structured and unstructured interview guides. These responses are not surprising as

Table 3 shows that 56% of the residents believed that writing off debts was a good development as it provided relief to residents. While table 4 shows the conflicting views of CVF managers where 62% rejected the notion that the writing off debts was a good development. The responses of the two groups to questions also revealed the existence of disagreement on whether the directive was a good development or not with ratepayers praising it and CVF managers condemning it.

5.3.1 Major beneficiaries of the directive

The study identified ratepayers as the major beneficiaries

(despite benefits were of a temporary nature) followed by ZANU PF (as an election contestant) with local authorities and businesses major losers. These views were revealed on both quantitative and qualitative responses. The quantitative responses are as shown on figure 2 below.

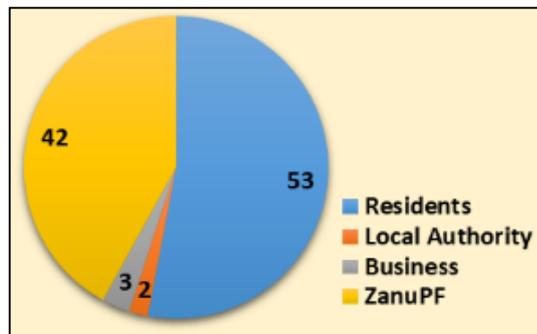


Fig. 2: Major beneficiaries of the directive

Figure 2 above shows that residents were identified as major beneficiaries at fifty-five percent (53%) followed by ZANU PF at forty-two percent (42%). On the other hand the study proved that local authorities and businesses were the major losers.

5.4 What strategies can be applied by local authorities to encourage residents to pay their water and rates bills on time in future?

The most commonly suggested strategy by both residents and CVF executives was installation of prepaid water metres and also making sure most of their services are prepaid. The other strategies suggested by both residents and CVF managers included offering incentives or discount for those who pay on time and disconnecting water every three months for those in arrears as participants felt that it is the only language residents understands to ensure payments. Data analysis also revealed that the ratepayers and CVF were able to suggest a number of future strategies which can be applied to ensure timely collection of municipal charges which included the following.

- Charging reasonable and affordable rates.
- Timeous billing and delivery of bills.
- Engaging those who owe large sums of money in council works programmes.
- Scrapping off of unnecessary levies.
- Sending constant reminders
- Prompt legal action
- Intensified water disconnections
- Reduction of the debt cycle
- Engaging residents through their ward councillors and their associations.
- To encourage them to pay bills monthly. Encourage residents to pay bills monthly.
- Facilitate debt clearance by coming up with payment plans for those who fall into arrears.
- Coming up with clear debtors policies.
- Improving the speed of service at local authorities' cash collecting points.
- Introduction of on-line payments.
- Introducing weekends pay points.

6. Recommendations

In the light of these findings from the study, it is

recommended that local authorities should come up with clear debtors' policies which specify how bad debts are identified, classified and written off. To avoid being victims of such political motivated directives in future local authorities should intensify their revenue collection efforts. This could be achieved by offering incentives and other discounts to those who pay their bills on time and taking punitive measures on those who fall into three months and above arrears. In addition the study recommended that local authorities should also consider the bulk of their services to be prepaid in this way they will eradicate the possibility of debt accumulation by ratepayers. Final the study recommended that local authorities should ensure they maintain dialogue with residents associations and other pressure groups that fight for the welfare of ratepayers in this way they will avoid these groups taking their issues and grievances to politicians. Politicians normal make political decisions which are not necessarily in the best interests of those who are intended to benefit from them. It is recommended that the enabling Acts be amended so that the powers of the minister to give directives to local authorities are completely removed.

7. Conclusion

The study also concluded that the major beneficiaries of the directive were residents and Zanu PF as an election contestant and local authorities were major losers. The directive adversely affected local authorities as it created huge debts for them leading to their failure to meet their financial obligations for many years thereafter. In addition the study advanced a view that for local authorities to avoid being victims of such ministerial directives in future they should intensify their revenue collection efforts. This could be done by offering incentives and other discounts to those who pay their bills in time and taking punitive measures to those who fall into arrears. The intensified revenue collection strategies could include among others making sure most of their services are pre-paid. The need to amend the enabling legislations to completely remove the role of the minister in operations of local authorities.

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