# Capacity building in a hostile environment:
# The Case of Zimbabwe's Rural District Councils

**David Mandiyanike**

University of Botswana
Email: ndix68@hotmail.com

## Abstract

*The paper examines capacity building in Zimbabwe's Rural District Councils (RDCs) from 1994 to 2001 and the resultant erosion of capacity during Zimbabwe's protracted political and economic crisis that followed. It is prudent to ask whether there was 'capacity building' or 'capacity erosion'. The paper establishes that the capacity building was piecemeal and that there was no genuine desire to build capacity, but that Councils embarked on these programmes to access the funding that came with the programmes.*

*In some cases, the design of the Rural District Councils' Capacity Building Programme (RDCCBP) was too rigid, derailed by the central government's half-hearted attempts towards decentralisation, and failed to allow RDCs to* learn-by-doing*. Because of Zimbabwe's politico-economic crisis, national level politicians were peremptory in their demands for better RDC results and an opportunity to learn was lost. The plethora of other rural development projects coupled with the project-based approach of the RDCCBP condemned capacity building efforts to the rigidities of projects and programmes, yet capacity building is better perceived as a continuous process with experiential learning. The paper concludes by arguing that capacity building efforts in RDCs were largely unsuccessful, and were derailed by the 'Zimbabwe crisis'; the result can only be described as 'capacity building that never was'. Internal efforts by RDCs to build their own capacity are more sustainable than efforts prompted by the 'carrot and stick' approach of external actors, such as central government (in a bid to 'hive off' responsibilities) and funding agencies.*

**Key words**: Rural District Council, capacity building, learning-by-doing, Zimbabwe.

## Introduction

Local governments should have adequate resources – financial, human, and infrastructure – proportionate to their legislative mandates. Capacity building (CB) has been deployed to remedy deficits in resources. CB is thus a *sine qua non* condition for sustainable development. CB is not just about training people or strengthening organisations but also requires engagement with complex and rather intangible aspects of governance such as norms, values, political culture, social capital and incentives for change (ECDPM, 2003).

In view of the political and economic crisis that gripped Zimbabwe (from 1999) during the implementation of the Rural District Councils' Capacity Building Programme RDCCBP, this paper is a critical reflection that examines the (RDCCBP). This can be described as 'capacity building that never was'. The gains of the programme were eroded by the protracted political-economic crisis in Zimbabwe. The RDCCBP was too rigid, derailed by the central government's half-hearted attempts towards decentralisation, and failed to allow RDCs to *learn-by-doing*. Because of Zimbabwe's politico-economic crisis, national level politicians were peremptory in their demands for better RDC results and an opportunity to learn was lost. The study of CB in Zimbabwe helps to enhance institutional memory for the benefit of the various institutions and the wider public. Zimbabwe also provides a significant example tool for other developing countries who may find themselves in a similar situation, and for the donor community in developing countries.

The paper sketches the theoretical contours of capacity through the lenses of Zimbabwe's RDCs and acknowledges that Zimbabwe has a history and development trajectory that fits a number of countries. There are many constraints to capacity building – broadly classified as exogenous and endogenous. Exogenous factors were external to the RDCs, and included, for example, the significant effects of amalgamation, and political and economic decline. Endogenous factors were those inherent in the RDCCBP design, for example, treating RDCs as homogenous entities and expecting numerous projects to be implemented at the same time. This paper will focus on constraints that arose as a result of the political-economic crisis. The paper proffers lessons of experience for international development and cooperation.

## Theoretical overview of capacity building

CB means different things to different people. For purposes of this paper, CB is taken to mean a 'conscious' effort to strengthen and improve the abilities of staff members and organisations to perform tasks in a more efficient, effective and sustainable manner (Peltenburg 1996: 9). Honadle (1981: 577) defined CB as the ability of people and institutions to do what was required of them. She also noted the drawback of this definition as it fails to define what is to be built. Others view CB as referring to improvements in the ability of public sector organisations, either singly or in co-operation with other agencies, to perform appropriate tasks defined by necessity, history or situation (Grindle and Hilderbrand 1995: 445). In the case of the Rural District Councils (RDCs) in Zimbabwe, appropriate tasks also refers to legislative mandates – ie: the duties and responsibilities imposed by the RDC Act (Chapter 29: 13) (GoZ 1988).

CB has been at the centre of development efforts for the last six decades. Pieterse (2002: 1) argued that this was fuelled by similar international discourses that valorise the local as a site of strategic defence against powerful globalising currents and as the frontline in the war against poverty. Within the realm of economic development, CB also received renewed interest because of the experiences of

policy prescriptions under structural adjustment in the 1980s. In 'rolling back the state', Lemon (2002: 21) observed that central governments passed on the cost of providing public goods and services to local government without sufficient adjustments of either state fiscal transfers to local levels or the revenue raising powers of local government.

Honadle (2001: 81) contended that the concept of institutional capacity was not static. She contrasted it with physical capacity in the sense of being able to measure the potential of a vessel to hold a defined amount of liquid, or a computer to store so many bits of data. Institutional capacity changes over time and space, as Zimbabwe illustrates clearly.

With Zimbabwe's decay, the notion that capacity is neither constant nor static is reinforced. Furthermore, the idea of a 'learning curve', automatically makes capacity a moving target (Honadle 2001: 81).

Land (2000), Kaplan (1999, 2001 and 2003) and Postma (2003: 81) argue that CB is a slippery and elusive concept, which remains rather obscure and used interchangeably with similar concepts such as 'institution building', 'capacity development' and 'institutional development'. GTZ (1999: 3) advised that CB must take place on three levels: individual; institutional and organisational; and the overall institutional system level (legal, political, economic and administrative frameworks).

Peltenburg (1996: 9); Olowu (1998:1) and Grindle (1997: 5) viewed capacity, as the ability to perform appropriate tasks and fulfil roles effectively, efficiently and sustainably.

Franks (1999: 52) argued that capacity was defined as the overall ability of the individual/group to perform their responsibilities. He went on to highlight that it was possible to imagine an organisation that had a capable staff, yet did not have the capacity to perform its functions because it was either grossly understaffed or because the policy framework did not allow satisfactory performance. Grindle and Hilderbrand (1995: 443) concurred and noted that organisations and trained individuals do not perform in a vacuum, and that their ability to carry out assigned responsibilities is a function of the broader context within which they operate. Capacity depends on the presence of viable institutions, leadership and vision, financial and material resources, skilled human resources, and effective work practices – systems, procedures and appropriate incentives (ECDPM, 1998). Land (2000) argues that capacity deficits or weaknesses in local government could rarely be attributed to a single cause.

### *Dimensions of capacity*

Grindle (1997) put forward five dimensions of capacity.[21] These dimensions discuss capacity with regards to central government departments and ministries. Kaplan (1999 and 2003) argued that

---

[21]The five dimensions are: the action environment; the institutional context; the task network; the organisation; and the human resources. aspect. For purposes of this paper, these are not further explored.

'features of organisational life' (ie: context and conceptual framework; vision; strategy; culture; structure; skills; and material resources) incorporate a panorama of factors that affect the ability of organisations to achieve specified goals. The dimensions are interactive and dynamic and hence Kaplan's framework is more useful.

Land (2000: 3) observed that increasingly it was accepted that CB programmes were more successful and were more likely to be sustainable when they responded to an internal initiative, and when they were supported through a process approach, and not through single one-time events. Issues of ownership, commitment and leadership are central to this notion of capacity as a process. Kaplan (1999: 22 and 2003: 323) advised that:

> *While every organisation may share similar features, nevertheless, each organisation is unique both in itself and in terms of its stage of development and this uniqueness demands unique, singular and specifically different responses. While the model may adequately describe the elements of organisational capacity and even order of their acquisition, it cannot predict or determine organisational processes, which are complex, ambiguous and often contradictory'.*

Indeed in some countries, performance problems diagnosed at the organisational or individual level may be deeply embedded in economic, social and political deficiencies, and efforts to improve performance must focus primarily on these conditions. On a cautionary note, Grindle and Hilderbrand (1995) highlighted that while the importance of the broader contextual setting for organisational and individual activities may seem obvious, a large number of CB initiatives were designed without considering this.

Grindle (1997: 6) prefers the terms *capacity development* or *capacity strengthening* to signal that the task was one of strengthening existing capacity rather than constructing mew capacity. Morgan (1997: iii) noted that CB could refer to either *processes* or *outcomes*, meaning both efforts to improve organisational performance and/or improvements to practices developed. CB is not an end in itself but a means to an end.

The CB approach thus has two components – the *demand side* and *supply side*. The demand side consists of the organisation(s) and the staff whose capacities need to be strengthened, while the supply side encompasses all organisations undertaking efforts to build capacity (Peltenburg 1996: 11).

### *Key constraints to effective CB*

The road to CB (especially for local governments) is winding − Postma (2003: 81) compared it to a river which meandered with the contours of the topography. Institutional weaknesses are rarely merely technical problems: as Corkery *et al* (1998: 543) argued they generally reflect systemic problems related to politics and culture, as well as management capacity and performance, and thus it is critical to analyse why weaknesses exist, as administrative capacities cannot be strengthened unless the political, social, economic and cultural contexts are understood. A number of problems or

limitations could be encountered. These could include lack of vision, political interference, organisation and human resources development problems (Peltenburg 1996: 13).

Peltenburg (1996: 13) argued that, in highly politicised environments, the planning and/or implementation of CB interventions may be affected. On donor funded projects, there may be political interests on both donor and receiving sides geared to short-term gains.

Teskey and Hooper (1999: 7) advanced the notion that there was insufficient incentive to build capacity at the political level. They believed that politicians would naturally tend to support programmes which increase their electoral popularity, eg: building schools, laying roads, providing drugs to health centres, because politicians needed to be re-elected every five years so gain more electoral support for policies which yield short-term results.

Olowu (1998: 10) argued that the erosion of public servants' salaries in Africa over the years has resulted in a depressed incentive system[22], with the 'take home'[23] of many officials barely sufficient for one week's existence. Thus civil servants seek to hold more than one income-earning activity or job, thereby reducing commitment to the main one. At the same time remuneration for skilled contract staff is high which dampens the morale of low-paid public servants.

## The Zimbabwe crisis

Since 1999, Zimbabwe has gone through a very rough period, both politically and economically, The 'Zimbabwe crisis' has been well documented and affected all spheres of life for many Zimbabweans. Bond and Manyanya (2003) discussed 'Zimbabwe's plunge' at great length, tracking the country's economic development from pre-independence to the crisis period since 1999. In discussing 'Zimbabwe's unfinished business', Hammar *et al.* (2003) also chronicled the background to the economic development downturns and the socio-political meltdown (see also Nhema, 2002; Sachikonye, 2002 and 2011). The political crisis triggered related crises – food security, a fuel crisis, and the rule of law, − which escalated to such unprecedented levels that service delivery dropped into the abyss. Zimbabwe's local authorities were reeling as they failed to deliver essential services; infrastructure broke down, qualified and experienced personnel absconded in large numbers − joining the private sector or emigrating to the diaspora. Some areas went on for long periods without essential services, and doctors and industrial workers were on strike (Musekiwa *et al,* 2013; NewZimbabwe 2009). Meanwhile the Zimbabwean dollar entered into a state of hyperinflation – Kadzere (2008); Jongwe (2008) and BBC (2008) cited the inflation rate at 231 million per cent. This high inflation rate culminated in a *de facto* abandonment of the currency and replacement with the US dollar made official in early 2009.

---

[22]Mentz (1997) talked of a civil service demoralized, underpaid, bloated and thriving on venal activities – instead of wages.
[23]As seen in many posters in the RDCs visited – 'my take home is not enough to take me home.'

Since 2000, elected members in the RDCs were no longer the preserve of Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and were increasingly being dominated by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). In 2008, an attempt to end the crisis, a power-sharing agreement between the rival political leaders – Robert Mugabe, Morgan Tsvangirayi and Arthur Mutambara was brokered by former South African President Thabo Mbeki. The Global Political Agreement (GPA) and its attendant but somewhat shaky Government of National Unity (GNU) provided a transition to normalcy and managed to stabilise the country.

Hammar *et al* (2003: 39) argued that *'the reality for many RDCs was that they were assuming their authority at a moment of national economic decline, reduction in public sector spending and growing popular discontent with the government in general'*. Over time, there was increasing pressure on the RDCs to generate local revenue for their own administration and local development activities, placing severe strains on them and in some cases bringing them into direct and often outright competition and conflict with their constituents. There was also growing unease about the question of authority itself, and local political tensions mushroomed as ZANU-PF's hegemony waned and it feared losing its grip on long dominated RDCs.

Essentially, the RDCCBP did not manage to build the capacity of RDCs to plan and manage their own development programmes on a sustainable basis because the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) ignored some critical elements of CB. In line with ECDPM (2003: 1) it can be argued that:

> *Development cannot be achieved by throwing money, projects and external know-how at problems. It is the product of each country's historical and cultural circumstances and involves fundamental societal transformation.*

Grindle and Hilderbrand (1995: 443) similarly observed that a large number of CB activities had produced meagre results and that the investment had not paid off in terms of improved organisational and individual performance. The work on which this paper is based set out to test the hypothesis that capacity building efforts need to deal with these intangible complex issues, such as norms, values, political and organisational culture, social capital and incentives for change.

## Methodology

There are 60 RDCs in Zimbabwe, and the study sampled eight RDCs from four (of the eight) provinces: Mashonaland Central, Manicaland, Midlands and Matebeleland South for a good geographical representation.[24] The study examined one suspended council, or so-called *laggard*, in each province and one of those said to be doing well (*progressive*).[25] It also considered the amalgamation mix in 1993 (i.e. how many Rural Councils and District Councils amalgamated to

---

[24]This paper draws from a doctoral research that examined critically the performance of rural local authorities in Zimbabwe over a period of ten years (from 1993 to 2003). The performance of local authorities had been progressively declining. Money, equipment and other resources were made available through the Rural District Councils Capacity Building Programme (RDCCBP) and other donor-funded programmes to salvage the RDCs, but the downward trend still persisted. Was there a willingness to build lasting capacity or it was being driven by donor conditionality?

[25]Councillors were suspended by the MLGNH. The 'progressive' ones were also appraised by the same ministry.

make up the RDC) and political history and affiliation (pro- or anti- ZANU-PF) (Mandiyanike, 2009). The research included semi-structured face to face interviews with key informants - local government practitioners (chief executive officers, a permanent secretary, council chairpersons, RDC heads of departments, and District Administrators), and examination of official records and documentation. Primary data included field study observations and reflections on personal experiences of key informants[26]. Anecdotal evidence was also drawn from the author's experience as a local government practitioner.

## An overview of local government in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is a unitary state with three major levels of governance – central, provincial and local government.[27] Local government is split into two – Urban Councils established under the Urban Councils' Act (Chapter 29: 15) 1995 (as amended), and rural/farming areas established under the Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:13) 1988. The discussion will focus on RDCs. Mutizwa-Mangiza (1991) and Mandiyanike (2013) contend that until independence in 1980, local government in Zimbabwe was divided racially, based on the principle of 'separate development', a Rhodesian[28] formulation of apartheid. Rural Councils were relatively autonomous, and catered for white settlers in commercial farming areas. The small non-viable District Councils were primarily instruments of administering the subject race in the villages. This arrangement existed for almost five decades and in 1993, these Local Government Units (LGUs) were amalgamated to form Rural District Councils (Mandiyanike, 2009). In 1993, government removed the District Administrator (DA) from being the Chief Executive Officer of the District Council[29]. The DA remained an influential advisor to council, implementer, government regulator, and monitor. Amalgamation was a political decision meant to remove one of the last vestiges of colonial rule – the de-racialisation of local government – which took place under the Rural District Councils Act No.8, passed in 1988 but not implemented until July 1993 (Matyszak, 2010). The transition to the new dispensation was fraught with resistance from the respective contenders and haggling among members of staff. The five-year delay in effecting the provisions of the RDC Act was testimony to the complexity of the exercise that sought to unify two very different institutions at different levels of sophistication, intended for different purposes (Mandiyanike, 2009). In addition, traditional Chiefs played an increasingly partisan role as allies of ZANU-PF during the crisis, although their official role is administered by a separate Act (Traditional Leaders' Act) and beyond the purview of this paper.

Following the amalgamation of Rural and District Councils in 1993, the GoZ, with external assistance, sought to improve the operations of RDCs. The justification given for the CB programmes was that RDC lacked the skills and resources to shoulder these added responsibilities. The challenge

---

[26] See Mandiyanike 2009 for a detailed methodological discussion
[27] There has been a tendency to mix national/sub-national levels of governance with central/local government. In Zimbabwe, the Provincial Councils Act (Chapter 29:11) significantly changed the misnomer of 'two levels of governance'.
[28] Rhodesia – colonial name for Zimbabwe
[29] The Rural District Councils had to employ their own Chief Executive Officers.

to the GoZ was thus to tailor CB of RDCs with access to resources. In turn, these efforts at the local level, would feed into national consensus building so that the transfer of central responsibilities and resources would lead to more equitable and sustained development.

Prior to the implementation of the CB programme, the *Strategic Plan for Capacity Building* (Plan Afric, 1994: 6) acknowledged that the process of building the capacity of the RDCs was complex and long-term, and that t RDCs were at different starting points in a fluid and challenging environment.

The Strategic Plan (Plan Afric, 1994: 20) warned that there was nothing more damaging to the morale of the RDCs than to give them new responsibilities without the means to perform them., The objective of the RDCCB programme was to develop the capacity of all RDCs to plan, implement and manage their own District Development Programmes and delivery of essential services, within the government's overall decentralisation programme. The RDCCB programme had three components: institutional development, capital development and human resources development (HRD).

## Rural local government in Zimbabwe – during the crisis

The outcome reflects the systemic nature of the problems faced and the superficial changes made by RDCs and other actors in addressing the problems highlighted.

### *Decentralisation-centralisation nexus*

With regard to decentralisation, government officials were skating around the debate. The Ministry of Local Government and National Housing (MLGNH) expounded 13 principles on decentralisation as a roadmap on the way forward. However, it was oversimplistic to assume that ministries and departments would release responsibilities to RDCs or be directed by RDCs. When the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) was introduced in 1991, most civil servants were set for retrenchment, which they went to great lengths to resist. Parties to the decentralisation initiative glorified it by day and savagely resisted it by night. MLGNH as the parent ministry for local authorities and was seen as becoming 'the mother of all ministries' and decentralisation became a 'talk show' rather than a genuine attempt to improve service delivery. GoZ *Hansard*, volume 27 (63): 6687 of 8 May 2001, conceded that *'whilst the government has a sound decentralisation policy, the implementation aspect leaves a lot to be desired'*.

Thus attempts at decentralisation were half-hearted, which rather than 'premature decentralisation', can instead be seen as *pseudo*-decentralisation. This bureau-pathology and a murky legislative framework, resulted in too much ministerial control and duplication of institutions and authorities, which impacted negatively on RDCs. Several papers, including an address by the permanent secretary in the MLGNH, identified two hundred cases where the MLGNH could intervene in RDC activities without hindrance. We are yet to see the changes brought about by the new constitution.

### Coming to grips with amalgamation

There are issues that the authorities and RDCs seemed to ignore, namely influential people and the political environment. For example, MLGNH has default powers to suspend RDCs and councillors (as will be discussed in detail hereunder). Indicators used for suspension were skewed and subject to the whims of the powers that-be through the wanton use of the default power.

Amalgamation was a surgical process that conjoined two distinct bodies, and deep-seated problems inherited at amalgamation were either underestimated, or simply ignored. The most discernible problems were divided loyalties on the part of staff, different working and cultural practices, party affiliation and, most significantly, divergent educational and economic circumstances. At amalgamation, members of staff were the 'eyes and ears' of their councillors from former councils. This evoked a strong sense of patron-clientelism and cliques/fiefs as councillors hoped to get the truth from their 'own employees'.[30] Before amalgamation, many Rural Council councillors had relatively informal ways of conducting council business, for example with resolutions agreed at the country club, and consultations with commercial farmers. In many cases, council officials were not privy to these discussions but acted on the decisions. At amalgamation, the District councillors were used to formal minuted decisions that authorised action. The councillors were cautious in 'covering their backs'. Councillors from the former Rural Councils were irked by this 'red tape' but were met with hostility from their District Council counterparts. Council debates following amalgamation often discussed procedural issues rather than substantive developmental issues.

There were also differences in the educational and economic circumstances of the councillors. There is a general superiority or inferiority complex in Zimbabwe, based on a person's fluency in English. Many councillors from the former District Councils were peasant farmers and spoke little English. Whilst the white councillors from the former Rural councils were often no better educated, they could speak English fluently and occupied large tracts of land (a clear symbol of wealth). Economically, most councillors from the former Rural Councils were commercial farmers and relatively well off, whilst the district councillors were peasant farmers and/or teachers or civil servants. Collapsing or these wide divergences was almost impossible. One former District Administrator (DA) remarked, *'amalgamation was nothing but putting unit tax into the same pot [as the rural resources]'*.

### Staffing levels within RDCs

Most RDCs lost a lot of qualified staff during the political and economic crisis[31]. In Gokwe RDC, war veterans[32] 'dismissed' some officials and forcibly removed them from office. Officials from Gokwe RDC and McGregor (2002) gave detailed accounts of how the forced removals were effected with

---

[30]In Guruve council in 1994, councillors from amalgamating Mvurwi rural council demanded the presence of a particular roads supervisor in meetings, whom they constantly asked whether what other officers said (from Guruve council) was true.

[31] See Mandiyanike (2013) for an analysis of staff turnover during this period

[32] Ostensibly former combatants of the 1970s guerrilla war who formed the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA) after independence, which led the invasions of commercial farms during the crisis

impunity. In these debacles, no handover- was conducted and the war veterans took files with them for 'investigation' and /or 'archiving'. These files have never been recovered, nor was anyone brought to book about these disappearances (Mandiyanike, 2009). War veterans disrupted operations in some RDCs for purely political ends to punish political opponents. In Gokwe South RDC war veterans went on to demand a quota for all council positions, and travel/subsistence allowances for coming to council. It seems that once people have tasted violence, the tendency to use it again for whatever purpose cannot be undermined or ruled out.

### *Homogeneity-heterogeneity divide*

The RDCCBP treated all the RDCs as homogeneous entities, irrespective of their different socio-political and geophysical conditions. In spite of the common legal framework, RDCs differ quite significantly and have to be treated as such. It is worth noting that during the formative stages of RDCCBP, the Strategic Plan for Capacity Building (1994) acknowledged that CB of RDCs was complex and long-term, and that RDCs were at different starting points and had varied resource bases.

The *Strategic Plan for Capacity Building* (Plan Afric, 1994 6) cautioned that:

> *Capacity building should not be constrained with a rigid framework. There is need for a flexible approach, which takes into account the different starting points of the RDCs and allows for the maximum participation of the various interested parties especially RDCs themselves.*

Smoke (2000: 3) complained that decentralisation programmes tend to treat all local governments as if they were similar in capacity and needs, and to devolve too many new responsibilities to the weak local governments. With the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) gnawing at the roots of central government operations in Zimbabwe, there were strong calls for change in local government, and RDCCBP was considered a palliative measure to reduce the increased pressure on RDCs. Within this environment, Smoke (2000) cautioned that there was a perceived urgency to reform, so careful planning was foregone. As one facilitator aptly summed it up, 'there was so much movement but no motion'. Smoke (2000: 3) advised that:

> *It is necessary to build commitment and capacity for local governments to assume greater responsibility on behalf of their constituents ...decentralisation reforms should be progressively phased in with incentives such that it is clear to local governments what they have to achieve before they will be assigned additional responsibilities.*

Furthermore, due to the crisis, a significant amount of donor support was abruptly withdrawn from government activities. In winding up the initial phase of RDCCBP in 2000, 19 RDCs were to be given continued support, but the government stayed with the 'good' councils and ignored the 'bad' ones. Possibly, this was a subjective justification to show the donor community that the MLGNH was willing to run with the donor agenda. Thus, the ministry, through the hawk eye of the Provincial Administrator (PA), looked at 'good' Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), chairpersons, finance committees '*dzine chimiro*' (decent finance committees) or a combination of these, considering councillors' performance, commitment, and the openness to change of CEOs and key staff.

### Project planning and management – RDCs biting off more than they could chew

All the RDCs prepared the strategic plan following insistence by the RDCCBP that these were essential to qualify for District Development Grants (DDGs) and District Development Loans (DDLs) (the DDG manual stipulated that only projects on the strategic plan would be considered for funding). On a visit to the sampled RDCs, it was amazing to see how quickly these plans could be pulled out to show a prospective funder. However, one respondent lamented that:

> It is a pity that we spend so much time and effort producing these documents, but there is no commitment in following them. The macro-economic environment we are operating in makes it impossible to operationalise such wishful activities.

The GoZ, for its own political expedience, even introduced programmes such as the Rural Development Fund (to be implemented by RDCs) that ran parallel to the RDCCBP. A majority of the RDCs are members of Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) Association, which also had the Natural Resources Management Programme (NRMP II) running the same time as RDCCBP. As one interviewee said,

> RDCs had too much on their plates and could not make the most out of this window of opportunity. An opportunity to maximise the learning was lost.

The resulting plethora of rural development projects managed by the RDCs had different reporting and implementing requirements. Instead of improving their performance, RDCs were busy 'visiting' the different funding agencies and trying to impress them. As political pressure intensified, RDCs focussed their attention on irrelevant but politically sensitive projects to appease politicians. Sadly, this was done at the expense of much-needed services for deprived communities.

Two officers at Umzingwane RDC, in a joint interview admitted that

> We use these development plans to suit the various donor preferences; if another donor were to come and indicate the type of projects they prefer to fund we would go along with that.

During RDCCBP, the training component commenced late, was uncoordinated and the District Training Teams and Provincial Training Teams were not sufficiently functional. The funding came to an abrupt end before the RDCs realised it. Thus Healy (2001: 310) observed that training in the RDCs was seen as a series of events − workshops, seminars and study visits − rather than a process of developing knowledge and skills of RDC employees to meet changing circumstances. Inevitably, people would engage in workshops as a substitute for work and also for the attendant *per diem*. In a similar vein, one government official argued that:

> Due to budgetary constraints, some sector ministries were willing to co-operate with the RDC if it provided the requisite material, chiefly, travel and subsistence allowance and transport. ...... Approaches and procedures of various programmes gave rise to some confusion within project departments (of RDCs); support to RDC development is very often dependent on whether incentives like subsistence allowance are provided and (that) sector ministry staff were still hiding behind arguments that their key result areas took precedence over RDC business.

### Budgeting

A budget is allocative in nature but constrained by environmental conditions and overarching political and fiscal objectives. Caiden and Wildavsky (1980: 66) argued that:

> *Budgeters in low-income countries often do not know where they stand with respect to basic features of national financial life; their estimates of income may be way off; their estimates of expenditure may be even more inaccurate.*

The scenario that Caiden and Wildavsky (1980) paint neatly fits Zimbabwe. The GoZ encountered similar problems in preparing and implementing its budgets. RDCs, as microcosms of the centre, bear the brunt of these economic ills.

Under the RDC Act, budgets are prepared by the RDC and approved by the minister. Annex 2 of paper by MLGNH (2003) highlighted the problem of overbearing ministerial control, and as the minister must approve borrowing, the markets and banks are closed off from determining the creditworthiness of RDCs. CEOs and finance officers argued that *'the onerous task of approving budgets and borrowing powers took a long time. As a result, RDCs lacked confidence to take the initiative. Similarly the private sector was scared of any business with councils'.* Budgeting was one process but what happened in practice was sometimes very different. Officers indicated that *'the expenditure pattern was very difficult to predict especially with inflation skyrocketing'*[33]. Thus, there was always provision for supplementary estimates, so that *'the budget became a series of patches'*.[34]

Gokwe South RDC admitted that the forced temporary closure of offices by war veterans in 2001 had an adverse effect on the operations of all RDC departments. *'Revenue collection was retarded, the use of the 2001 budget was suspended and then the 2000 budget was used ... The RDC collected far much below than what it estimated to collect during the same period'.* Most RDCs admitted that due to economic hardships, most farmers paying unit tax were designated for resettlement, thus drastically reducing expected revenue by 50%.

### Pressure for change among disparate actors

In the RDCCB programme the pressure for change was placed squarely on the shoulders of the CEO. In a private company this is feasible, but in the public sector, especially in RDCs, the CEO is neither the locus nor focus of decision-making. Many other actors call the shots, including the RDC councillors, the DA/Minister, other politicians such as the provincial governor, leading ZANU-PF leaders from national to village level, Members of Parliament, war veterans, and anyone else person with political connections. Within this multifarious array of actors, the CEO is unable to act as a key change agent as assumed by RDCCBP.

---

[33]Reaching an all time high of 231 million per cent as previously discussed.
[34]Resonating with Caiden and Wildavsky (1980, p.66)'s assertion

### Characteristics of 'laggards' and 'progressives'

The terms *laggards* and *progressives* were coined by the Provincial Support Teams (PSTs) and the Provincial Administrators (PAs), and were evident in the terminology used in the selection of the 19 RDCs who remained in the CB programme, including 'commitment to change', 'progressive chairman and CEO'. It is notable that the laggards shared some common features, including:

a) a high turnover of CEOs which deprived them of continuity in top leadership;

b) Turmoil in these RDCs leading to their closure in some cases.

c) Difficulties in obtaining data, as officials had been dismissed or resigned, war veterans had ravaged the offices and 'archived' off some records, or records could just not be found.

The opposite was true for the progressives. The progressives were characterised by some form of stability. Being progressive was also a result of the personal or impersonal relations between the PA, the RDC chairman and/or the CEO. Cordial relations attracted better scores and vice versa.

### (Over)Politicised local government

In Zimbabwe's RDCs, a number of cultural traits emerged. Among the majority of councillors, there was a strong partisan belief that the ZANU-PF and government were inseparable. Councillors having come into office on a ZANU-PF ticket owed unquestioning allegiance to the party, although others, especially white councillors who came in as independent candidates, had an oppositional mentality.

Some council meetings were held to accommodate ZANU-PF party affairs, as most councillors also held party positions. There were instances when council vehicles were being used primarily for ZANU-PF business, and when the party attempted to hijack council business. For example, in Bindura and Chirumhanzi RDCs party officials made it mandatory that proposed budgets should be discussed at party meetings before coming to Council. In one instance, Bindura councillors defied a party order not to discuss the budget at a meeting. They argued that adequate notice had been given to all the stakeholders. Conversely, Chirumhanzi RDC pandered to the dictates of senior ZANU-PF officials, and a full Council meeting was adjourned so that the party officials could examine the proposed budget before the Council resolved. This scenario was quite common within most RDCs.

On the staff side, most of the new CEOs after amalgamation had participated in the liberation struggle and were being repaid by the offer of top posts. In some RDCs, (Gokwe South, Mutasa and Gwanda), some members of staff occupied senior positions in ZANU-PF to the extent of being 'untouchable' in cases of breaching council procedures. In these cases, controversial disciplinary procedures ensued. Because of the emotive manner in which council decisions were made, officers were summarily dismissed and RDCs lost these cases at the labour courts. Some of these members of staff went on to contest Council elections and in the most interesting scenario, one came back as a Council chairman

in Gokwe South RDC. This development had far-reaching consequences for the RDCs, as the politics-administration dichotomy became blurred and political considerations got an upper hand.

### *Suspensions and non-suspensions – Mazowe, Mutasa and Gokwe South RDCs*

Under Section 157 of the RDC Act, Chapter 29:13, the Minister of Local Government may suspend a councillor or a council if he/she has reasonable grounds of suspecting improper behaviour, and a number of RDCs were suspended. From the eight sample RDCs, Mazowe RDC was suspended in 1999 for alleged mismanagement and maladministration, but everyone interviewed acknowledged that there were other unstated reasons. People argued that the Mazowe RDC chairman had defied a party order by standing against the party choice in the election at the beginning of the new council in 1998. A ZANU-PF party caucus meeting was held just before the official council meeting. The provincial party leadership[35] 'proposed' the 'party choice'. In the council meeting it was supposed to be a matter of formally nominating the person and immediately closing nominations. Procedurally, the DA, as the presiding officer, would ask for more nominations, if any. However, in the actual council meeting, another nomination of the incumbent chairman was proposed and seconded. A vote was held and the party choice lost. Officials from Mazowe RDC indicated that:

> *the incoming council chairman, having frustrated and embarrassed the provincial leadership, assumed office with considerable ill-feelings and hostility, in spite of having been democratically elected by his fellow councillors.*

The allegations of mismanagement at Mazowe RDC found fertile ground and the minister came down heavily on the council. When councillors were suspended, they were asked to make individual submissions/responses on the allegations.[36] This rendered them compliant and they were reinstated but the chairman was dismissed.[37] Such action (the dismissal of the chairman) was an anathema to the democratic process. John Nkomo[38] (1998), addressing the suspended Guruve RDC, indicated that councillors had a collective responsibility over the decisions/resolutions made by council. In light of that, why then hold the council chairman vicariously liable for the collective misdeeds of the council? Thus, the chairman's ability to avoid suspension depended on his whimsical idiosyncrasies and political clout rather than formal legal instruments.

In the case of Mutasa and Gokwe South RDCs, the MLGNH levelled allegations of mismanagement against the councils. However, the councils survived suspensions because they were in good standing with their provincial political leadership. When the Minister of Local Government went to Gokwe South RDC (late 1999) to meet the Council before advising them of the suspension, his attention was drawn to the challenges of administering the urban wards of Gokwe Centre and that this had caused a

---

[35]The Provincial Governor was the ZANU (PF) provincial chairperson.
[36]Similar tactics of individual submissions to the Minister were also used in the Guruve RDC case.
[37]This applies to the other RDCs (not in the sample) that were suspended.
[38]The former Minister of Local Government Rural and Urban Development who suspended most Councils in post-independent Zimbabwe.

furore[39] with the communities. At the meeting with the Council, the minister's attention was swayed to look at the possibility of according Gokwe Centre town status (though this was never on the agenda). The minister ended up setting up a commission to oversee the establishment of Gokwe Town, but according to Council officials

> the commission died a natural death and was quietly and conveniently buried in the administrative machinery.

Gokwe South RDC was 'invaded' by war veterans on 5 February 2001 and forced to close temporarily. A group of war veterans thronged the council offices with drums, chanting liberation songs, and forcibly removed all council employees citing a number of allegations. The onslaught by war veterans on RDCs has been described as 'a national curse: the tragedy of government by war veterans' (McGregor 2002; Hammar 2005: 2). This meant that the war veterans could act with impunity. Thus, in the case of Zimbabwe's RDCs the 'suspendable indicators' (reasons used by the minister to suspend councils) were a function of the councillors' political muscle or lack of it and the patrons behind them.

In all the examples of council suspension (and even war veteran disruptions), the District Administrators (DAs) participated in the commissions of enquiry set up to investigate the allegations and made the recommendations that led to suspensions and/or dismissal of chairpersons and Councils. Thus DAs became commissioners, running the council on behalf of the Minister of Local Government. In case of suspended CEOs, the DAs were also appointed as acting CEOs. This scenario casts doubt on the neutrality or impartiality of the DA. The DAs played the part of police, prosecutor, jury, judge and jailer. This is in direct contravention of the tenets of natural justice, particularly the *nemo judex in sua causa* rule (no person may be a judge in his own cause).

### Whither amalgamation, decentralisation and CB?

The discussion has illustrated the problems that beset RDCs. The performance problems diagnosed within RDCs were deeply embedded in the volatile economic, social and political context. Political support for stable independent systems is an essential prerequisite to efforts to build capacity (Grindle and Hilderbrand, 1995: 43) but this was never done in the RDCCBP.

By concentrating on the observable factors, RDCCBP merely generated superficial shifts whilst leaving the underlying problems intact. RDCs participated in the programme for the incentives attached to the programme and CB was *'hopelessly confused as a funding hoop where cosmetic changes were made to secure funding and authentic change became elusive'* (James 2000: 2). When the programme came to an abrupt end, RDCs reverted to their old habits. They diverted their attention to new sources of funding; whatever traces of RDCCBP left were fortuitous. However, some RDCs

---

[39]It was alleged that councillors and staff were heavily involved in residential and business stands scams. Minutes seen showed that some individuals had illegally allocated themselves stands.

had their own internally generated organisational improvements which they have continued, for example, Bindura RDC's 'in search of excellence' management meetings and Umzingwane RDC computerisation efforts.

### *Recommendations: critical factors for success*

As RDCs, the parent Ministry and interested stakeholders contemplate on how to strengthen the capacity of RDCs, the following recommendations need to be seriously considered.

1. Providing a sound constitutional basis for LG. The provisions in the new Constitution approved in May 2013 provide a litmus test for GoZ's commitment to decentralisation.

2. Decentralisation is not a panacea and GoZ should heed Ayee's (1996: 49) advice to reject the romantic view of decentralisation. The GoZ should be very clear on what exactly they want to decentralise and ensure an acceptable level of preparedness by the RDCs who will assume the new functions. Honadle (2001: 85) talked of dual errors − the error of devolving programmes where there is not enough local capacity, and the mistake of keeping programmes centralised when there is local capacity that could be readily developed. For example, MLGNH could consider awarding stars/points to RDCs, similar to 'beacon councils' in the United Kingdom.

3. Labour relations in RDCs should be streamlined. The Minister of Local Government and his/her staff need to be clear about the laws governing the dismissal of staff before they can proffer advice to RDCs, which hitherto, has been misleading or inept, as DAs and their staff have (ill)advised RDCs on the basis of public service regulations that should not be used for RDC staff.

4. In the event of an RDC or CEO being suspended, the DA or any member of his/her staff should not become commissioner or Acting CEO. This tends to obliterate their supervisory/watchdog role as they would have assumed the role of police, investigator, prosecutor, judge and jury, which is untenable for sound administrative practice. Fairness and impartiality is essential. The RDC Act empowers the Minister of Local Government to appoint the DA and Assistant, but also any civil servant to be a commissioner or Acting CEO. Thus the DA will be able to supervise the new CEO or commissioner without fear or favour.

5. For the smooth implementation of projects, that there needs to be broad and generally agreed methods of funding and project implementation for rural development projects. A round table conference between all the funding agencies (local and international) together with RDCs and the GoZ, should pave the way for the minimum conditions and guidelines for project planning and management. This 'development bible' will allow RDCs to familiarise themselves with the basic conditions from across the spectrum of funding agencies. Consequently, RDCs

would not need to acclimatise to different and confusing arrangements for the different funders.

An ability to formulate policies is a critical function of any local government. The capacity to do so, becomes particularly important in the aftermath of crises such as those experienced in Zimbabwe's RDCs. A strong recovery from the devastation of the politico-economic tsunami that took place in Zimbabwe is necessary.

## *Conclusion*

CB can work if the determinants of capacity are taken into account. RDCs failed to plan, implement and manage their own development programmes and maintain essential services on a sustainable basis as a result of the political-economic tsunami. CB is unlikely to flourish in such extreme contexts. The paper identified a number of issues that stifled CB efforts, *viz*, design of the RDCCBP, and political, legal and economic factors. The economic and governance crisis that engulfed Zimbabwe had a negative bearing on the efforts that RDCs were making to improve their operations. The CB efforts undertaken in an era of crisis can be characterised as 'capacity that never was'. As the political and economic situation improved, the Government of National Unity ushered an aura of normalcy.

## References

Ayee, J. (1996) The Measurement of Decentralisation: The Ghanian experience 1988-1992. *African Affairs,* 95**,** 31-50.

BBC (2008) 'Zimbabwe inflation hits new high' BBC News, 9 October 2008 Retrieved 22 November 2013

Bond, P. & Manyanya, M. (2003) *Zimbabwe's Plunge – Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism and the Search for Social Justice*, Harare, Weaver Press.

Caiden, G. & Wildavsky, A. (1980) *Planning and Budgeting in Poor countries,* New York, Little Brown.

Coomer, J. and Gstraunthaler, T (2011) The Hyperinflation in Zimbabwe, *The Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* 14(3)311–346

Corkery, J. *et al*. (1998) Minding one's own: The institutional dimensions of management of capacity development. *International Review of Administrative Sciences,* 64**,** 531-551.

ECDPM (1998) Approaches and Methods for National Capacity Building. Maastricht: ECDPM (European Centre for Development Policy Management).

ECDPM (2003) InfoCotonou no. 2: Building capacity – How can it be done? Maastricht: ECDPM (European Centre for Development Policy Management).

Franks, T. (1999) Capacity Building and Institutional Development: Reflections on Water, *Public Administration and Development,* volume 19**,** 51-62.

GoZ (1988) Rural District Councils Act Chapter 29: 13 Harare, Government Printers.

GoZ Hansard (2001) Volume 27 (63) of 8 May 2001,  Harare, Government Printers.

Grindle, M. (1997) *Getting Good Government - Capacity Building in the Public Sectors of developing countries,* Harvard, Harvard University Press.

Grindle, M. S. & Hilderbrand, M.E (1995) Building sustainable capacity in the public sector: what can be done? *Public Administration and Development,* 15**,** 441-463.

GTZ (1999) *Capacity Building for sustainable development - Concepts and strategies and instruments for GTZ,*

GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit or German Technical Cooperation): GTZ Publication.

Hammar, A., Rouftopolous, B. (2003) *Zimbabwe's Unfinished Business - Rethinking Land, State and Nation in the context of crisis,* Harare, Weaver Press.

Healy, P. (2001) Training and Public Sector Reform: An Integrated Approach. *Public Administration and Development,* 21**,** 309-319.

Honadle, B. W. (1981) Capacity building framework: A Search for a concept and purpose. *Public Administration Review***,** 575-580.

Honadle, B. W (2001) Theoretical and Practical Issues of Local Government Capacity in an Era of Devolution. *The Journal of Regional Analysis and Policy,* 31**,** 77-90.

James, R. (2000) *Capacity Building News No. 5*, ECDPM, Maastricht, ECDPM.

Jongwe, F. (2008) "Zimbabwe inflation soars to 231 million percent". (9 October 2008). Yahoo! News**.**

Retrieved 22 November 2013

Kadzere, M. (2008). "Zimbabwe: Inflation Soars to 231 Million Percent". (9 October 2008).  allAfrica.com / The Herald (Harare). Retrieved 22 November 2013.

Kaplan, A. (1999) The Developing of Capacity. *United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service.* Community Development Resource Association.

Kaplan, A. (2001) Capacity building – Shifting the Paradigms of Practice in Eade, D. & Ligteringen (2001) *Debating Development*, Oxford, Oxfam GB.

Kaplan, A. (2003) Capacity Building: shifting the paradigms for practice. In Eade, D. (2003.) *Development Methods and Approaches - Critical Reflections.* Oxford, Oxfam GB.

Land, A. (2000) *Implementing Institutional and Capacity Development: Conceptual and Operational Issues.* ECDPM Discussion Paper 14.

Lemon, A. (2002) The Role of Local Government in Parnell, S. Pieterse, E, Swilling, M. & Wooldridge, D. (2002) *Democratising Local Government: The South African experiment*, Cape Town, University of Cape Town Press.

Mandiyanike, D. (2013) Nebulous Labour Relations in Zimbabwe's Rural Local Authorities *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance* Issue 12: May 2013

Mandiyanike, D. (2009) Researching in your Home country: The dilemma of a returning student *AREA* Vol 41(1) 64 - 71.

Mandiyanike, D. (2006) In Search of Capacity – *The case of Zimbabwe's Rural District Councils* Unpublished PhD thesis, Royal Holloway University of London

Matyszak, D. (2010) Formal structures of power in rural Zimbabwe, Research and Advocacy Unit, Harare, http://www.swradioafrica.com/Documents/Formal%20Structures%20of%20Power%20in%20Rural%20Zimbab we.pdf  accessed October 2012

McGregor, J. (2002) The Politics of Disruption: War Veterans and the Local State in Zimbabwe *African Affairs* 101, 9-37

Mentz, J. C. (1997) 'Personal and Institutional Factors in Capacity Building and Institutional Development'.

*ECDPM Working Paper No. 14.*

MLGNH (2003) Pillar 2: *Framework for the revised decentralized implementation strategy,* Paper presented at the Decentralisation Stakeholders' Meeting December 2003, Harare Sheraton, Harare.

Morgan, P. (1997) The design and use of Capacity development indicators. Toronto, CIDA.

Musekiwa, N., Naid, L., & Neethling, U. (2013). Reconstituting the capabilities of local governments in post crisis situations through public participation: The case of Zimbabwe. In C. Manyeruke, & G. C. Phiri (Eds.), *Complexities of transformation in Zimbabwe* (pp. 84-107). Harare: OSSREA Zimbabwe Chapter.

Nhema, A. G. (2002) *Democracy in Zimbabwe - From Liberation to Liberalization,* Harare, University of Zimbabwe Publications.

Olowu, D. (1998) Building critical capacities for sustainable development in Africa: Matters arising. *The International Journal of Technical Co-operation,* 4**,** 1-19.

Peltenburg, M. *et al*. (1996) *Building capacities for better Cities,* Rotterdam, Institute of Housing, Rotterdam.

Pieterse, E. (2002)'Participatory Local Governance in the making: Opportunities, constraints and prospects in Parnell, S. Pieterse, E, Swilling, M. &Wooldridge, D. (2002) *Democratising Local Government: The South African experiment*, Cape Town, University of Cape Town Press.

Plan Afric (1994) *Strategic Plan for Capacity Building*, Harare, MLGNH

Postma, W. (2003) Capacity building: the making of a curry in EADE, D. (2003) *Development Methods and Approaches -Critical Reflections.*Oxford, Oxfam GB.

Sachikonye, L.M (2002) Whither Zimbabwe? Crisis & Democratisation *Review of African Political Economy No.91;13-20*

Sachikonye, L.M. (2011) *When a State turns on its citizens – 60 Years of Institutionalised violence in Zimbabwe*, Johannesburg, Jacana Media.

Smoke, P. (2000) *Building Capacity for Effective Local Government in Developing Countries*, Paper delivered to the 2000 APA National Planning Conference, www.asu.edu/caed/proceedings00/smoke/smoke.htm.

Staff Reporter (2009) 'Zimbabwe suffers worst economic crisis ever'Newzimbabwe.com (11/12/2009)http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/fuel9.12934.html accessed 5May 2013

Teskey, J. & Hooper, R. (1999) Tanzania Civil Service Reform Programme: Case Study. Paper prepared for the Joint DAC Informal Network/ACBF workshop Harare, October 1999.