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## Are Zimbabwe's Local Units of Public Management Expendable?

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**Abstract.** The article focusses on the question of whether Zimbabwe's local units of public management are substitutable. The question is asked considering Zimbabwe's present heightened national government emasculation of lawfully designated local authorities' powers and tasks. Water supply and sanitation, solid waste management, road construction and maintenance, healthcare, motor vehicle registration and licensing are just a few of the examples of local functions the national level has allocated to national agencies it directly controls over the past few years. Given this background, the article sought to explore through structured documentary analysis acceptability of the national level's substitution of the local units of public governance in service delivery. Crucially, the engagement revolves around the fundamental policy issue of protecting the autonomy of the local units. Among others, the article finds that the local sphere of government is rooted in rich philosophies, theories and legal protections that make it indispensable in the country's governmental system even as it is constantly encountering brutal assault seemingly designed to bring it into the orbit of national government; tamed, subdued and emasculated.

**Keywords:** Zimbabwe, national government, local government, local functions, service delivery

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## **Introduction and Brief Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this article is to engage the issue of the replaceability of local public government bodies in Zimbabwe. The need to address this important policy issue has arisen from the perception that national intrusion into local affairs is becoming more frequent, brazen and concerning in Zimbabwe's intergovernmental relations. As the article will disclose, there is widespread emasculation of legally assigned functions to local units of government. This appears to be a threat to the architecture of the local public governance system that national government was intended to supplement, and it may even jeopardize the existence of local self-government as the form of government that enjoys the closest proximity to communities.

It has been decided that most countries in the globe are decentralizing the delivery of local services since they consistently fail, particularly for the impoverished. Additionally, it is claimed that insufficient efforts are being made by national governments to «ensure adequate health, education, water and sanitation to the people [1]. Realization has also emerged over the national government's seeming lackluster correlation between public spending and results. Similarly, communities often attribute problems with service delivery to centralization. In a similar vein, it has been noted that state agency directors frequently prefer to have the national government's policy preferences represented in their decision-making processes as opposed to local ones [2].

It has been stated that if “local administrations are not given pride of place in the policy process circle of their essence [3]”, development policies are certain to fail. In a similar spirit, it is hypothesized that local government administration marginalization prevents national progress from occurring. It is also commonly held that local governments have the authority to independently oversee the local affairs of the residents of the territory for which they were created [4]. Furthermore, it is commonly asserted that “the functions and administration of local government affect the lives of ordinary Zimbabweans more than that of central government [5]”.

Some of the services that the national government has taken over from the local level of government are waste management (2022, 2023), road building and maintenance (2009, 2018, 2022), healthcare (2021), and water and sanitation (2001). (Table 1). This has occurred without the tiniest formality of providing residents with a platform to express their ideas or involving local officials in an extensive consultation process [6]. The national level has frequently said that the public interest drove its decision to assume control of the local duties, however there is considerable disagreement about the validity of this assertion [7]. The national level's meddling in local issues has seemingly prompted uncertainty among citizens on the status of the local units in general and whether they could be replaced with the ease frequently observed in Zimbabwe.

Table 1

**Situations where national government has assumed responsibility  
for local services**

<b>Local services taken over by national government</b>	<b>Government agency/company it was given</b>	<b>Year</b>
Water supply	Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA)	2001
Vehicle registration	Zimbabwe National Road Administration (ZINARA)	2009
Road construction and maintenance	ZINARA	2009
Road construction and maintenance	Department of Roads (DoRs)	2018
Health facilities	Ministry of Health (MoH)	2021
Solid waste management for Harare City Council (HCC)	Geogenix BV, a German investor (GBV)	2022
Waste management for Harare Metropolitan Council (HMC)	Environmental Management Agency (EMA)	2023

Source: [14].

### **Objectives, Organization and Methodology**

Against the foregoing, the article aims to articulate from documentary analysis the issue of whether the local units of government are replaceable by the national sphere as it seems to be the case unfolding with common frequency and rapidity in Zimbabwe. The objectives are: (a) to aid get more insight into the nature of the perceived substitution; (b) to assist further clarify the status of the local units of self-government in the face of their substitution by national government; (c) to assist recommend ways of addressing the problem; (d) to contribute to the ongoing policy dialogue in Zimbabwe about the autonomy of local government; (e) to recommend areas for additional study.

The essay is structured as follows: the section on conceptual and theoretical perspectives on municipal government comes after the introduction. This is followed by a section on the objectives, organization and methodology of the article. A section on the structure and geographical hierarchy of the governmental system in Zimbabwe follows. After this, the article focuses on the research findings to the question: are the local units substitutable? The responses are reviewed based on three perspectives: (1) subsidiarity principles; (2) Zimbabwe's constitutional provisions on devolution; (3) subsidiarity legislation on local government, i.e. the Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:13) and the Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15). Following this are concluding remarks, and recommendations for addressing perceived national government substitution of local functions and the article wraps up by suggesting possible areas for additional research.

Using document analysis, the paper conducts a methodologically sound inquiry into Zimbabwe's replacement of local government. Compared to cross-country research, the paper's focus on intergovernmental interactions in Zimbabwe enables it to account for external influences more thoroughly. These exogenous factors include external shocks as well as institutional and cultural influences. Whenever possible, tables are used in the text to improve the discussion of central-local relations in Zimbabwe. Subsidiarity principles, Zimbabwe's constitutional provisions on local government, and the two principal legislations for local government in Zimbabwe—the (RDCs) Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:13), for rural district councils, and the (UCs) Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15), for urban councils, are the main sources of analysis. There is emphasis on the principle of subsidiarity as the basis for Zimbabwe's constitutional provisions on local government and the RDCs and UCs Acts.

### **The Local Units and the Principle of Subsidiarity**

Local government is the least or bottommost subdivision of government. The five traits that set it apart, according to Olowu (1988), are its: (1) legal personality; (2) specific powers to carry out a variety of tasks; (3) significant budgetary and personnel autonomy subject to limited central oversight; (4) effective citizen engagement; (5) localness. Additional distinguishing features include its jurisdiction over a range of services, including solid waste management, roads, clinics, policing, parks, libraries, fire protection, and planning, as well as the administrative, legislative, and executive acts that fall within its purview [8].

According to the subsidiarity principle, local governments should handle matters pertaining to their communities [9]. Additionally, it underscores the need for local government to focus on concerns unique to the community, like waste management, roads, water and sanitation, and so forth [10]. Additionally, it highlights that local government is the appropriate level of government to provide for local services because it is in charge of concerns pertaining to local legislation, taxation, and spending. The perception of local government is one of being disengaged from issues of national importance, including macroeconomic policy, security, defense, foreign policy, and monetary and fiscal policies. The national or sovereign government is in charge of these issues.

Local government is better suited to manage local affairs than national government for a number of reasons. They include: (i) enabling communities to run their own affairs; (ii) allowing decisions to be made at the lowest tier of a governmental structure; (iii) allocative efficiency; (iv) producing goods and services at a lower cost than central governments; (v) proximity; (vi) delivering demand-responsive services; (vii) raising the willingness of customers to pay for services; and (viii) enabling locals to have a say in decisions about the kind, quantity, caliber, and mix of local services as well as the price they are willing to pay for them.

## Snapshot of Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe, in Southern Africa, is a landlocked nation. It lies midway between the Limpopo and Zambezi Rivers. According to Figure, its neighbors are South Africa to the south, Botswana to the southwest, Zambia to the north, and Mozambique to the east. The population of Zimbabwe is estimated at 15 million. The Shona ethnic group, who comprise 82% of Zimbabwe's population, is followed in size and frequency by the Ndebele and a few smaller communities. The three most widely spoken of its sixteen official languages are English, Shona, and Ndebele. On 18 April 1980, Zimbabwe, formerly known as Southern Rhodesia, reclaimed majority rule from Britain [11].



Map of Zimbabwe [12]

Three levels of government are recognized in Zimbabwe's Constitution which was enacted in 2013. These are: (1) national government, (2) provincial and metropolitan councils and (3) local councils. The national government is the first tier of Zimbabwe's governmental system (Table 2). The provincial and metropolitan councils are the second layer of government (Sections 268 and 269 of the Zimbabwean Constitution). The major administrative divisions in Zimbabwe are the provinces, which they preside over. The two metropolitan provinces of Harare and Bulawayo are among the ten provinces recognized under the constitution.

Local authorities make up the third rung of Zimbabwe's governmental hierarchy. There are roughly 7–8 rural councils in each of the eight non-metropolitan provinces, with a distribution of 28 urban councils and 60 country

councils (Table 1). A district’s population may range from 50,000 to five times that much. Ward councilors who are directly elected make up both urban and rural councils. Ward councillors oversee and represent the issues of residents in Zimbabwe’s districts, which comprise both rural and urban areas. The main legislation governing the functions of rural and urban local government are the Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:13) and the Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15). Among other things, they outline the responsibilities and powers of local government in providing services.

Table 2

**Spatial organization of government in Zimbabwe**

Organization	Number	Name (s)
National Government	1	The Government of Zimbabwe
Provincial Councils	8	Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Midlands, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Manicaland, Masvingo
Metropolitan Councils	2	Harare, Bulawayo
City Councils	8	Harare, Bulawayo, Kadoma, Kwekwe, Gweru, Masvingo, Mutare, Victoria Falls
Municipalities	9	Bindura, Chitungwiza, Chegutu, Chinhoyi, Kariba, Redcliff, Gwanda, Beitbridge, Kariba
Town Councils	10	Rusape, Mvurwi, Karoi, Norton, Gokwe, Shurugwi, Zvishavane, Chiredzi, Chipinge, Plumtree
Local Boards	5	Epworth, Ruwa, Chirundu, Hwange, Lupane
Rural District Councils	60	Guruve, Zvimba, Zivagwe, Zaka, Vungu, Uzumba-Maramba-Pfungwe, Umzingwane, Umguzu, Tsholotsho, Tongogara, Sanyati, Rushinga, Runde, Pfura, Nyanga, Nyaminyami, Nkayi, Ngezi, Mwenezi, Muzarabani, Mutoko, Mutasa, Mutare, Murewa, Mudzi, Mberengwa, Mhondoro, Mbire, Mazowe, Masvingo, Marondera, Manyame, Mudzi, Makonde, Kusile, Kadoma, Insiza, Hwedza, Hwange, Hurungwe, Gutu, Gwanda, Goromonzi, Gokwe South, Gokwe North, Chivi, Chiredzi, Chirumanzu, Chipinge, Chimanimani, Chikomba, Chegutu, Chaminuka, Bulilima, Buhera, Bubi, Binga, Bindura, Bikita, Beitbridge

Source: [13].

**Research Findings on the Question:  
Are the Local Units Substitutable?**

This section of the article examines the issue of local government substitution in Zimbabwe from three perspectives: (1) subsidiarity principle; (2) Zimbabwe’s Constitution; (3) subsidiarity legislation on local government. The goal is to illuminate the discourse on the question of whether the local units of the governance system in Zimbabwe are replaceable by national government.

### **Does the Principle of Subsidiarity Facilitate for Local Government's Substitution?**

The principle of subsidiarity which is a key principle in Catholic social teaching does not facilitate for the substitution of local government. It holds that, as a general rule, matters should be handled by the smallest, lowest, or least centralized authority that is capable of addressing them effectively. In other words, problems should be solved at the most level possible, and only when they cannot be solved at the local level should they be brought to a higher authority. The principle is based on the idea that individuals and local communities are best equipped to make decisions about their own lives and needs, and that larger or more centralized authorities should only intervene when local communities failed. Even then, a way out is capacitating communities rather than substituting them.

The argument against national government intervention is that it violates this theory by taking power away from local governments. Local governments are seen as being more accountable to their constituents and better able to respond to local needs and preferences. National government is seen as being more distant and less responsive to the needs of communities. In addition, there is trepidation that national government substitution of local government may lead to one-size-fits-all approach that does not take into account local variation. Another argument is that it can lead to a loss of local autonomy and control, as well as a weakening of local democracy. The national level is not the system of government closest to communities, local government is.

Additionally, the powers and functions assumed by national government are already assigned local authorities. Another argument for the principle of subsidiarity is that it promotes individual freedom and responsibility. When individuals and communities are given the power to make decisions about their lives, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership over those decisions and to take responsibility for their outcomes. Additionally, subsidiarity allows for greater creativity and innovation at the local level, as different communities can experiment with different solutions to their problems. Subsidiarity also helps to foster a sense of community and solidarity, as it encourages individuals and groups to work together to solve problems. All of the above arguments mitigate against national government substitution of local government in Zimbabwe.

### **Does the Constitution Allow for the Substitution of the Local Units?**

The 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe does include some elements that are aligned to the principle of subsidiarity and not the substitution of subnational units of government. For example, the constitution includes a section on devolution of power, which allows for the transfer of powers and functions from the national government to local authorities. In this spirit, the Preamble to Chapter 14 of the constitution concentrates on local and provincial administration and emphasises the importance of devolving authority to lower levels of government in Zimbabwe.

Section 264 (2) of the Constitution specifies the objectives of the transfer of governmental power and responsibilities to provincial, metropolitan, and local authorities (Table 3).

Table 3

**Justifications for distributing government powers and responsibilities**

Section of Zimbabwe's Constitution	Objective
264 (2) (a)	to give powers of local governance to the people and enhance their participation in the exercise of the powers of the State and in making decisions affecting them
264 (2) (b)	to promote democratic, effective, transparent, accountable and coherent government in Zimbabwe as a whole
264 (2) (c)	to preserve and foster the peace, national unity and indivisibility of Zimbabwe
264 (2) (d)	to recognize the right of communities to manage their own affairs and to further their development
264 (2) (e)	to ensure the equitable sharing of local and national resources
264 (2) (f)	to transfer responsibilities and resources from the national government in order to establish a sound financial base for each provincial and metropolitan council and local authority

Source: compiled by the authors.

In addition, the Constitution of Zimbabwe in sections 274 and 275 underscore that urban and rural local authorities represent and manage the affairs of people in urban and rural areas throughout Zimbabwe. In the same spirit, section 276 (1) of the Constitution emphasize that a “local authority has the right to govern, on its own initiative, the local affairs of the people within the area for which it has been established, and has all the powers necessary for it to do so”. It also instructs national government in section 276 (2) to come up with an Act of Parliament that may confer functions on local authorities, including (a). the power to make by-laws, regulations or rules for the effective administration of the areas for which they have been established; (b). the power to levy rates and taxes and generally to raise sufficient revenue for them to carry out their objects and responsibilities.

All of the above are important steps towards giving local governments more autonomy and control over their affairs. However, the constitution also includes a number of limitations on local government autonomy, such as the requirement that local authorities be accountable to the national government and that their activities be subject to national laws. Overall, while 2013 constitution does make some progress towards subsidiarity, it still falls short of fully implementing the principle. Additionally, the constitution has not yet been fully implemented, and there are still challenges in terms of ensuring that local governments have the resources and capacity to carry out their functions effectively. As such, it is still too early to say whether or not the 2013 constitution has fully aligned Zimbabwe’s governance structure with



the principle of subsidiarity. Nevertheless, local government can take comfort in that it is now constitutionalised, seemingly thwarting the case and intentions for its vile and easy substitution.

### Does Subsidiarity Law Facilitate the Substitution?

The Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:13)-for rural district councils and the Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15) — for urban councils assign provision of local services to local government and not national government. In this regard, the First Schedule to the Rural District Act (RDC Act) and the Second Schedule to the Urban Councils Act (UC Act) assign local administrations a variety of service delivery tasks and functions. Water supply, road construction and maintenance, healthcare, and waste management are some of the functions assigned local government (Table 4).

While the RDC Act does give local governments some autonomy, it is still not fully aligned to the principle of subsidiarity. The act gives rural district councils the power to raise and spend money, make by-laws, and control land use. However, it also allows the national government to intervene in the affairs of rural district councils if they are deemed to be failing. Additionally, rural district councils are required to submit their budgets and plans to the national government for approval. As a result, while the act does give some autonomy to local governments, it still retains significant amount of control for the national government.

The UC Act of Zimbabwe is also not yet fully aligned to the principle of subsidiarity because it gives national government significant control over the activities of local governments. It also allows the national government to take over the functions of local governments if they are deemed to be incompetent. Even then, it seemingly does not advocate for the assumption of local functions in perpetuity in the manner seemingly favoured by national government in Zimbabwe. Amidst the opaque takeovers, there are limits imposed by legislation that national government cannot run over. Both the RDC and UC Acts have been criticised for being too centralised and not giving local authorities enough autonomy to make decisions that are best for their communities. Even then, it is not *carte blanche* for national government.

Table 4

#### Cases of local government's obligation to provide local services

Service	Responsible institution	Authority
Water	Rural District Councils (RDCs)	Section 71 & 1 <sup>st</sup> Schedule to RDCs Act
Water	Urban Councils (UCs)	Section 183 & 2 <sup>nd</sup> Schedule to UCs Act
Roads	RDCs	Section 71 & 1 <sup>st</sup> Schedule to RDCs Act
Roads	UCs	Section 198 & 2 <sup>nd</sup> Schedule to UCs Act
Health	RDCs	Section 71 & 1 <sup>st</sup> Schedule to RDCs Act
Health	UCs	Section 198 & 2 <sup>nd</sup> Schedule to UCs Act
Waste management	RDCs	Section 71 & 1 <sup>st</sup> Schedule to RDC Act
Waste management	UCs	Section 198 & 2 <sup>nd</sup> Schedule to UCs Act

Source: [14].

## **What Insights Can We Draw from the Substitution of Local Units?**

The substitution of local government functions by the national government in Zimbabwe gives us insights into the priorities of national government, as well as the distribution of power within the country. In this regard, it may be said that national government is not as committed as it officially claims on the issue of devolution of power. The picture that emerges is of a national government with a penchant for overrunning the local units of government despite the constitutional protection accorded to them. The national government's priorities may be more focused on retaining power for its sake rather than on local issues. The shift in power may cause a sense of disenfranchisement among local communities, who may feel that their voices are not being heard. The centralisation of power may lead to a loss of local autonomy and decision-making, and a weakening of the local government. The national government may not have the same understanding of local issues and needs as local government. The shift of power may lead to a loss of expertise within the local government, as experienced officials may be replaced by those appointed by the national government. The national government may not be as accountable to the local communities as local government was. The centralisation of power may lead to increased bureaucracy and red tape, making it harder to get things done at the local level. The national government may not have the same level of knowledge of local issues, which could lead to poor decisions being made.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This section of the article accomplishes two goals. It first summarises the study's findings. Second, it draws conclusions that are consistent with the findings of the study. The Zimbabwean government's seeming purposeful and premeditated takeover of local government duties and responsibilities is a recurrent topic. Even so, it seems that the national government is reluctant to totally displace local government as the latter is tasked with giving its residents access to essential services like healthcare, education, and clean water. These services are critical to the wellbeing of communities and cannot be effectively delivered by national government. Additionally, it is observed that local government is closest to the people and therefore has a better understanding of their needs and priorities. Local government is also assessed as being better equipped to respond quickly and effectively to local issues and challenges. Even when it is elbowed out, it is pertinent to note that local government in Zimbabwe enjoys constitutional protection and is rooted in vibrant philosophies, subsidiarity legislation and theories of decentralisation.

It would appear that some limited central control or compensatory money can only be advisable in the provision of services when "spatial externalities, economies of scale, and administrative and compliance costs are taken into consideration" [15]. Similar to this, it is asserted that in order to improve local

government's capacity to provide services, more funding needs to be allocated to it [16]. Even in these exceptions, national governments are visualised complementing subnational entities, enhancing their capacities so they can govern better and not substituting them.

It may be productive if the national sphere of government in Zimbabwe purposefully supported local government through advice, facilitation, promotion and capacity building, among others. According to one author, healthy intergovernmental relations in Zimbabwe may need to be based on, “role clarity, transparency, respect, integrity, accountability, and sound judgment” [17]. The advice may have been in response to the current development where national government appears to have developed unbridled penchant for assuming local functions. It would not be inconvenient for the national government of Zimbabwe to begin treating the local units of government as important collaborators in progress. Considering their vital role in Zimbabwe's development, there is great expectation that they may need to be protected to the extent that their constitutionalization warrants.

### **Recommendations**

It is advised that efforts be accelerated in light of the research findings to guarantee that the national level's attempts to supplant the powers and functions of local authorities—discussed earlier in the article—are addressed in a manner that preserves the autonomy of Zimbabwe's local units of government. One place to start would be the 2013 decentralisation of authority to local governments mandated by the nation's present constitution. It seems to be the right thing to speed up the implementation of this process as it has proven to be a sluggish and challenging process.

There are a number of challenges that have been faced in trying to devolve power to local government in Zimbabwe that need to be overcome. Firstly, there is a lack of capacity and resources at the local level. Local governments often do not have the funds or expertise to carry out their tasks. Secondly, there is a lack of trust between the national and local governments which makes it difficult to cooperate and coordinate efforts. Thirdly, there is a lack of clarity and consistency in the policies and procedures for devolution, which makes it difficult for local government to know what is expected of them. Finally, there appears to be a lack of determination among the national government and some legislators to devolve power, as they fear losing control and influence.

These challenges have made it difficult to implement the principle of devolution in Zimbabwe, and they have made a negative impact on the quality of governance at the local level. Despite these challenges, however, there are some positive developments taking place, such as the establishment of local government associations and the training of local government officials. These initiatives are aimed seemingly at building capacity and increasing

cooperation between the national and local governments. Such efforts may result in national government scaling down on the issue of substitution of local authorities.

### Suggestions for Further Research

The article engaged on the issue of national government substituting local government in in Zimbabwe. One suggestion for future studies on this topic would be to conduct case studies of specific local governments in Zimbabwe or jurisdictions beyond it, to examine the impact of national government intervention on their functioning. This would allow, in the case of Zimbabwe, for a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with devolution in Zimbabwe. This may afford researchers the opportunity to compare their findings and determine whether or not the impact of national government take-over of local government powers and functions varies by region or country. Additionally, research could be conducted on the views of citizens and local government officials to gain a better understanding of how national government substitution of local functions is perceived and experienced on the ground.

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## Возможности оптимизации системы государственного управления Зимбабве

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**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается вопрос взаимозаменяемости органов местного самоуправления в Зимбабве. Данный вопрос актуален в свете сокращения полномочий и задач местных органов власти в стране. Подача воды, управление утилизацией ТБО, строительство и обслуживание дорог, здравоохранение, регистрация моторных транспортных средств и выдача лицензий на них — всего лишь некоторые примеры функций органов местного самоуправления, переданные национальным агентствам за последние годы. Исходя из этого контекста, в статье был проведен структурированный документальный анализ для оценки приемлемости замещения местных органов управления в сфере предоставлении услуг. Ключевым аспектом обсуждения является фундаментальная политическая проблема защиты автономии местных административных единиц. Автор указывает на то, что местное самоуправление является неотъемлемой частью системы государственного управления страны, хотя оно постоянно подвергается воздействиям, направленным на приведение его полномочий в сферу ведения национального правительства.

**Ключевые слова:** Зимбабве, национальное правительство, местное правительство, местные функции, предоставление услуг

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