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Empowering communities through CBP in Zimbabwe: experiences in Gwanda and Chimanimani

THEME SECTION

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This article briefly describes the experiences and lessons of community-based planning (CBP) in two pilot districts (Gwanda and Chimanimani) in Zimbabwe. The CBP process created the need to revitalise the planning and development structures in the pilot districts and engaged government throughout the process, which resulted in the mainstreaming of community empowerment principles in the decentralisation framework of the government of Zimbabwe.

Background

Systems for participation and local government

Zimbabwe has a long history of autocratic national and local political systems, including the kingdoms and chieftainships of pre-colonial times, the colonial and Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) regimes, and the *de facto* one-party state system of the 1980s.

From 1980 to 1988 the system of rural local government comprised the poorly resourced District Councils in the Communal Areas (formerly known as tribal trust lands) administered in terms of the District Councils Act (1980) and richer Rural Councils in the commercial farming areas, administered in terms of the Rural Councils Act, 1966. In 1984, the Prime Minister's Directive was issued to establish planning structures from village level to national level to ensure a more participatory and bottom-up approach to development planning. This was one giant step towards the decentralisation process taken by the government. In 1988, the Rural District Councils Act resulted in the amalgamation of Rural Councils and District Councils in 1993. Some of the key legislative changes after this include the conferring of statutory planning powers to Rural District Councils through Statutory Instrument 175 of 1999 and in 2000 the Traditional Leaders Act, which sought to strengthen the role of traditional leaders over local planning and development issues.

The structures of sub-national government in Zimbabwe are shown in Table 1.

The Traditional Leaders Act (2000) gave the chiefs, headmen, and village heads the powers to co-ordinate development, allocate land as agents of the Rural District Council, manage natural resources, preserve and maintain family life, culture, health and education, keep population records, try a range of crimes, and collect all levies and taxes payable to the council. This act gives traditional leaders a

Table 1: Structures of government in Zimbabwe

Level	Approx population	Structure	Role
Province	1–1.3 million	Provincial Development Council (political) and Provincial Development Committee (technical)	Consolidation of district plans and providing a link for local government to central government.
Local Authority	300,000–500,000	Rural District Council and Rural District Development Committee.	Planning and development authority at local level. The Rural District Development Committee provides technical support to the Council and is chaired by the District Administrator who is national government's representative at local level.
Ward	6,000–8,000	Ward Assembly and Ward Development Committee.	Unit of planning which coordinates village plans and links them with local government planning processes. The Ward Development Committee provides technical support to the Ward Assembly and is chaired by a Councillor who sits on the Rural District Council.
Village	600–1,000	Village Assembly and Village Development Committee.	The Village Assembly is the point where plans are generated and are chaired by the Village Head. The Village Development Committee provides technical support to plans at village level through an elected Chairperson.

wide range of powers in the planning system. It is however, still debated whether the Act will manage to link traditional leadership to the democratically elected rural district council structures in a manner that will remove rivalry, tensions, and conflicts in the planning process.

Planning in Zimbabwe is usually initiated at national or district level, to achieve national or district objectives, and is often linked to particular sectors or types of project. However, due to recent resource limitations, central government agencies, including local authorities, have not been initiating planning processes. Following the Traditional Leaders Act in 2000 there has been a shift from local authority-driven planning to a planning process driven by traditional structures. Many stakeholders are now unclear on the planning system and how it works and despite various local government legislative provisions since Independence, these only provide for community consultation, not participation. Attempts to develop an effective bottom-up system have been frustrated by factors including resource limitations, donor funding conditions, and change in government policy directions and planning procedures that are often developed from above. Hence there is still a lot of work needed in local government legislative reform in Zimbabwe to uphold principles of participation and people's empowerment.

Experience of participation in the NGO sector

Many NGOs in Zimbabwe are engaged in community-based development activities and most involve some form of community participation. CBP in Zimbabwe meant drawing on this experience and linking it to the local government planning system. Building CBP on existing forms of participation enabled various stakeholders to present their experience and input on the content, process, and implementation options. Developing training materials created a high level of commitment for both district and community facilitators to drive this process. These NGOs included SNV, the Zimbabwe Decentralised Cooperation Programme, Intermediate Technology Development Group Southern Africa and the Africa Community Development Publishing Trust. UNICEF, an intergovernmental body, was also involved, using the Community Capacity Development Approach (CCD).

Developing CBP in Zimbabwe

Evolution

The CBP project evolved from engagement and reflection between government, NGOs, and development practitioners, with interaction with Khanya, the South African organisation facilitating the CBP project. There was a common observation that despite heavy investment of resources and time at district and community level, three key concerns were evident:

- People's participation in determining their future and developing their own areas was far from satisfactory. People were still not exercising their basic rights and lacked the freedom to organise themselves to improve their livelihoods.

Mr Siziba presents to the broader community in Ward 17 in Gwanda. Many came and contributed towards setting ward priorities

Photo: Douglas Gumbo, IT Southern Africa

- Communication lines between communities and rural district councils and other support institutions remained relatively closed. Lack of open dialogue tended to limit opportunities for promoting accountability and transparency.
- Planning at district level remained dominated by top-down strategies and RDCs lacked clearly developed mechanisms for responding to community priorities.

CBP was seen as an opportunity for addressing some of these emerging concerns, and there was consensus to use existing knowledge and experiences to pilot a more effective approach to community-based planning in Zimbabwe, linking it with resource allocation systems. A number of possible benefits were identified, notably:

- creating opportunities for promoting community empowerment and ownership in the development process;
- developing a reliable method for obtaining realistic, integrated, and focused plans from ward level;
- increasing potential for integrating ward and local authority level plans;
- helping to identify additional sources of revenue for implementing local plans;
- creating opportunities for capacity-building for institutions operating at subdistrict level;
- bringing transparency to the selection and prioritisation of projects at all levels; and,
- creating opportunities for improved accountability during project and programme implementation.

In 2001 a review of experiences was conducted in Zimbabwe using participatory planning (Conyers, 2001) and a national workshop held to discuss the emerging findings, funded by the four-country CBP project. A decision was taken to pilot CBP in the Gwanda and Chimanimani districts. A core steering group was formed including the Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing (MLGPWNH), IT Southern Africa, Chimanimani RDC, Gwanda RDC, and Development in Practice (a consultant organisation focusing on local governance and community empowerment in Southern Africa) to monitor the implementation and knowledge-sharing process. The team met regularly with implementation teams on the ground. The implementation team consisted of multisectoral teams who underwent rigorous training in community-based planning building on their own experiences.

"Comparative regional experiences from the four-country CBP project were also shared to stimulate national debate. The CBP national dialogue process led to the production of briefing papers that were targeted at key decision makers and donors"

District Training Teams (DTTs) were established and trained to support the planning from district level, and Core Facilitation Teams (CFTs) were established at ward level, which included the Councillor, Technical extension staff, Ward Coordinator, and a respected person from each ward. Sharing results at district level involved electing community representatives, who later provided feedback to the broader community. Emerging lessons were then shared by community representatives at the national level. Comparative regional experiences from the four-country CBP project were also shared to stimulate national debate. The CBP national dialogue process led to the production of briefing papers that were targeted at key decision makers and donors such as the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Local Government and National Housing and DFID. A national workshop in 2003 shared the emerging results with stakeholders at both national and district level who were convinced of the need to roll out CBP in other parts of Zimbabwe. The steering group was then formalised as a national steering committee to spearhead the process.

The CBP approach used in Zimbabwe

The CBP system in Zimbabwe was process-based and involved:

- adaptation of four-countries CBP training manual;
- training district training teams;
- training core CBP facilitators.

Table 2: CBP approach in Gwanda and Chimanimani districts

Element	Adaptation in Zimbabwe
Planning unit	Ward.
Methodology	Five-day planning session facilitated by a core team chosen by the community. Emphasis of the methodology was more on developing a shared vision rather than dwelling on problems and constraints.
Facilitation of ward plans	By ward staff, part of Core Facilitation Team (CFT).
Training	An intensive ten-day training of District Training Team members by experts followed by three-day training sessions of the ward core facilitation teams by the DTT.
Financing the planning process	Rural District Councils and participating NGOs including transfer of funds from the CBP project managed by Khanya.
Funding the plans	Use of 50% of the levy paid by each ward in Gwanda.
Linkage to district plans	Ward plans are used as a basis for preparing district annual plans and budgets.
Implementation of the ward plans	Implementation occurs at two levels: first, the interest groups are responsible for implementing the relevant sections of the plan. Secondly, the support agencies, including the RDC, implement the rest of the plan with community participation.
Monitoring of implementation at ward level	An internal monitoring system has been developed in conjunction with the monitoring of council budgets on a quarterly basis. In practice, monitoring is initiated at ward level and then followed up by a similar exercise at district level – the impact of this monitoring system is still being evaluated.

- CBP manual trial runs and review
- actual ward planning
- community documentation of plans
- integration of ward plans at RDC level
- community feedback meetings
- district training team review meetings
- budget allocations and ploughing back of development levies
- knowledge sharing and information dissemination workshops

Table 2 summarises the methodological approach used in Zimbabwe.

Innovations in the use of participatory methodologies

Some of the innovations, which were introduced in Zimbabwe in the application of the CBP approach, included:

- Setting up a local and trusted Core Facilitation Team (CFT), which inspired a lot of confidence in fellow community members and unlocked their full participation.
- The creative involvement of respected leaders such as chiefs and councillors as facilitators;
- The establishment of the DTT, with periodic review and knowledge sharing meetings;
- The use of 50% of the levy paid by each ward in Gwanda proved to be a key innovation in sustaining community participation and financial contribution;
- CBP was applied in a manner that allowed divergent groups to build consensus and visions for the ward. The strength of the approach was seen when it was accepted in new resettlement areas and convinced groups such as the war veterans who had previously seen themselves as a superior groups in any community (see Box 1).

Impacts and outcomes

Some interesting impacts and outcomes have emerged:

- The DTTs brought a new level of commitment and new modes of institutional behaviour at district level, with a focused and shared vision. In the two pilot districts, 33 DTT members were trained and 75% of these can confidently drive the whole process without external support. The decision to focus on DTTs helped to promote greater integration by various stakeholders operating at district level in their approach to community planning and development processes. However, developing a shared long-term working framework proved challenging due to differences in institutional culture, resources, and funding conditions.

Box 1: Community-based planning and peace-building in Ward 22, Gwanda District

Ward 22 is a former commercial area which is now a resettlement area following implementation of the fast-track land reform programme in Gwanda District. There has always been a tendency in the new resettlement areas for war veterans to be the most prominent and visible group. When the initial CBP meetings were organised, 28 socio-economic interest groups were identified and invited to participate in the planning process. Although dominant groups such as the war veterans association were quick to show themselves, most participants felt that the CBP visioning process had brought them to the same level of understanding. CBP is now widely regarded as a powerful peace-building tool in this ward of Gwanda. It has also shown a lot of potential in unlocking the participation of previously marginalized groups in a peaceful manner. Interestingly, there is no difference in application and impact of CBP in communal or resettlement settings in Zimbabwe.

The community of Ward 1 in Gwanda review and reflect on the CBP process, including representatives from NSC, Mr Andrew Mlalazi (standing), Mr Ronnie Sibanda (Gwanda Rural District Council, second from left) and Ms Ashella Ndhlovu (third from left)

Photo: Douglas Gumbo, IT Southern Africa

- The CFT concept worked well in all participating wards in Gwanda, while the process in Chimanimani was affected by the prevailing political climate of that district which resulted from parliamentary elections in which the electorate was highly polarised. Of the 184 CFT members targeted, 169 were successfully trained in facilitating CBP at community level. This helped communities to internalise a range of participatory methodologies, facilitating the participation of over 120 community representatives in each ward planning session, i.e. a total of over 2,700 people who participated in the CBP process in each district.
- The community felt more empowered and inspired to participate in planning processes than ever before. This has been the central message in community review workshops and monitoring visit reports, demonstrating a sense of ownership of the ward plan by the community. However, community documentation and monitoring and evaluation skills emerged as key challenges towards ensuring full local ownership and control of the process.
- The plans produced are all based on **strengths, opportunities, and a collective vision** for the ward rather than a shopping list of problems they face in the ward. However, this process needs to be carefully facilitated to avoid falling into shopping list trap. Thorough training of community-level facilitators backed by targeted refresher courses is key to the success of this process.
- The CBP process has promoted inclusiveness of marginalized and vulnerable groups in the planning process as it enabled different socio-economic groups that had not previously been involved in planning to come together and formulate a shared vision for the ward.
- The process has convinced politicians who had earlier resisted it after realising the process was non-partisan, people-focused, and empowering communities to respond more effectively to their livelihood needs.
- The CBP process has made the role of the traditional leaders, councillors, and the local authority more visible in the ward, and given local people the conviction that CBP has created a new generation of leaders interested in their well-being.
- The use of legitimate structures has given different socio-economic groups and the wards an opportunity to interact, link up, and influence service provision. More service providers, particularly government departments, are now responsive to community priorities, e.g. the District Development Fund (DDF), AREX, and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) have restructured their service delivery approaches in response to community demands.
- Accountability between the Gwanda Rural District Council and the wards has improved as the communities participate in deciding how the levy is to be used and are aware of how much they will receive from the local authority. A lot of councillors are reporting that it is now easy to collect development levy.
- The CBP process went beyond the district boundaries and created the need to revatilise the planning and development structures in Matabeleland South Province. Other districts (six) have shown interest in the process.
- The creative engagement of government throughout the process resulted in the mainstreaming of community empowerment principles in the decentralisation framework of the government of Zimbabwe, although as yet there is no new legislation to reflect this.

Lessons learnt

The adapted CBP methodology, training, and facilitation

manuals/guides were well received in pilot districts. The training process resulted in useful inputs by stakeholders on the content, process, and implementation options. The process of developing the training materials created a high level of commitment for both district and community facilitators to drive this process to its ultimate end.

The concepts of the Core Facilitation Team and District Training Teams seem to be useful institutional models in implementing CBP. However the documentation capacity and the participatory monitoring and evaluation process of CFTs needs to be strengthened to enhance learning and innovation in communities.

The CBP plans that emerged in Gwanda triggered debate on the need for basing the district plans on community priorities. There is now consensus among councillors to build the district strategic plan and budget on the community submitted plans. SNV Zimbabwe (a non-governmental organisation focusing on promoting local governance) is working with local authorities to come up with strategic plans. It is this opportunity that the CBP process would like to link and collaborate with.

Ways forward in the future

The implementation team only managed to consult with the targeted districts that expressed a lot of interest in the CBP methodology. Consultations with various stakeholders have indicated the existence of a huge demand for CBP in Zimbabwe. Despite this interest it has proved difficult to raise resources for CBP activities in the current economic and political environment prevailing in Zimbabwe. The National Steering Committee (NSC) in collaboration with Intermediate Technology Development Group Southern Africa have put on their agenda the need to mobilise resources and share with stakeholders nationwide so as to scale up the process to ensure that lessons and experiences gained in this project are not lost.

Through continued dialogue with government there is a need to fully mainstream community-based planning into the decentralisation process. National guidelines are needed to support all these initiatives, and it is important to create and consolidate forums for sharing CBP lessons and experiences at community, district, provincial, and national levels. The NSC has been given the mandate by the government to look at the modalities of forthcoming national guidelines.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACDPT	Action Community Development and Publishing Trust
AREX	Agriculture Research and Extension
CBP	Community Based Plan
CFT	Core Facilitation Team
DDF	District Development Fund
DFID	Department for International Development
DNR	Department of Natural Resources
DTT	District Training Team
ITDG SA	Intermediate Technology Development Group Southern Africa
MLGNHPW	Ministry of Local Government National Housing and Public Works
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSC	National Steering Committee
RDC	Rural District Council
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
ZDCP	Zimbabwe Decentralised Co-operation Programme