



*Decentralization of Social Welfare Services to Urban  
Local Authorities in Zimbabwe*

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**Background**

Many authors in favor of decentralization have argued that a centralised top-down service delivery system is expensive, cumbersome, and inflexible, adapts slowly to new information and is prone to political abuse. Such top-down systems normally deny disadvantaged people easy access to institutions that allocate goods and services and the democratic control over the allocation and use of scarce resources. The debate on decentralization has included not only the division between central government and local government, but also decentralization to local communities. The main objective of decentralization is to reduce the number of tasks performed by central government. However, ill-conceived decentralization programmes can result in a deterioration of the services that may have been passed on to local governments. The intended decentralization of social welfare services from central government to urban local authorities in Zimbabwe cannot be an exception to the latter shortcoming.

the government is 3 officers per district and this has been compounded by other problems such as critical transport shortage, inadequate office accommodation and the general under provision from the fiscus. Given the latter scenario, the quality of services rendered by the Department of Social Welfare has been compromised and its coverage limited. Individuals seeking assistance currently have to visit the district offices and often distances travelled are vast, entailing some expenses in transport costs. The undesirable consequence of this scenario is that assessment of cases deserving assistance is limited to those who can visit the welfare offices and thorough evaluation of cases is not possible due to limited staff and other constraints already mentioned above. This research sought to critically review the decentralization exercise from central government to local authorities in Zimbabwe using the case of social welfare functions in Marondera Municipality. It also sought to highlight the benefits and pitfalls of the exercise, conditions precedent to the exercise, and the degree of preparedness of the municipality to receiving the service.

**The Research Problem**

Zimbabwe is currently facing economic hardships and this has seen over 60% of the population fall below the poverty datum line. This has resulted in pressure on social services as the number of people seeking assistance from government through the Department of Social Welfare has increased. There are 64 district welfare offices in the country servicing 83 local authorities with an average of 1.7 professional staff per local authority. The staffing level is inadequate as the ideal for

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## Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were basically four, namely:

- To highlight both the benefits and pitfalls of the decentralization of social welfare services local authorities like Marondera;
- To identify the conditions precedent to this decentralization exercise;
- To establish how prepared Marondera Municipality is to take up the new functions by way of assessing the staffing levels, capacity of the personnel, structures that are in place to support the programme and how they are coordinated; and
- To suggest the best timing of the exercise.

## Research Methodology

This research was carried out using a participatory action research methodology comprising such techniques as semi-structured interviews, discussions, participatory reflection and analysis. The research methodology was based on a Participatory Learning Process. Embedded in the process was having the council and residents participate in the exercise right from the beginning. This enabled them to own the process and identify at the end, the action they wanted taken up in order to assist with the decentralization exercise.

## Research Findings

- The research findings reveal that both central government and the Municipality of Marondera are aware of the advantages of decentralizing social welfare assistance. There is therefore no doubt as to the rationale and need for decentralization. What seems to be the critical issue relates to the modalities of the implementation of the decentralization exercise. The lack of a clear policy on how the services are going to be decentralized, and the standards to be followed have been cause for concern for the municipality.
- The research results also show that the Marondera Municipality has adopted a cautious approach. They have not done much preparatory work for the decentralization of the social welfare services, but are in the process of producing a database for children in difficult circumstances and the aged as part of the preparation for the decentralization. The database will be used by central government for purposes of calculating budgets for funds to be disbursed to the local authority.

- The Department of Housing and Community Services is the natural location of the proposed services. The research findings reveal that the department currently employs one welfare officer who is responsible for overseeing all the social welfare requirements of the town. This will not be adequate when the services have been decentralized. More people will have to be employed. However, the current structure in the department of Housing and Community Services will have to be expanded to strengthen the social welfare component.
- The real fear of the municipality is the gap between the funds to be received from government and the responsibilities to be passed on to the municipality. This fear emanates from previous experience where there were some unfunded mandates for education and health from the previous round of decentralization. Should a gap exist between the funds from central government and the responsibilities passed on to the municipality, rate payers will have to foot the difference.
- Although residents are partially satisfied with the services being offered by the Department of Social Welfare, they are split in terms of their support to the proposed decentralization. The bulk of those who are opposed have sited corruption as the major reason. Previous cases were sited when councilors used to refer cases for free treatment and there are allegations of favouritism in the manner in which this was done. There are also fears of embezzlement of funds by council officials. Those for decentralization to the local authority are convinced that the move will reduce delays in processing applications.
- Although central government views the decentralization exercise as necessary since it will improve service delivery, the manpower situation is making it difficult for them to satisfactorily deliver the service. It was also clear that central government does not have a clear policy on how the decentralization is going to take place.
- The research findings indicate that bridging the gap between the funds received from central government and the total disbursements for social welfare assistance will have disastrous consequences for the local authority. Marondera has very limited sources of funding and it will be extremely difficult for the local authority to bridge the gap without affecting some of the services they are currently providing.

## Recommendations

On the basis of the above findings, the following recommendations were made:

- Central government needs to come up with clear social welfare assistance policy with regard to the way they affect local authorities. The policy should clearly articulate how the services will be provided and the yardsticks or milestones to be met;
- Related to the policy issues is the need to streamline legislation to ensure that urban local authorities are included as authorities that provide social safety nets. Legislation is important as it gives proper legitimacy and accountability of local authorities for the new tasks. Legislation should also spell out central government's responsibility for making funds available to local authorities for social welfare assistance purposes. In coming up with the policy, government should consult the local authorities;
- The funding policy for social welfare assistance should be clearly based on a needs assessment on the ground and proper exit programmes should be devised for the other cases that can be sorted out;
- Capacity building will be essential for councils and other civil society organizations that are involved in the provision of social welfare services. Council should not ignore these in the decentralization exercise and social welfare services provision should be decentralized once capacity at local level has been assured. This means that there will be need for an intensive training programme to be put in place for the municipality. Even the only officer in council handling social welfare issues will need retraining. The training should be conducted before the services are decentralized; and
- Council should put in place mechanisms to ensure that funds earmarked for social welfare assistance are not diverted to other uses. Central government should punish errant municipalities that do not observe this rule. It is also important for council to put in place contingent measures to raise funds for social welfare services. Amounts from central government are not enough but the demand will keep increasing. Often corruption is difficult to deal with and therefore council should do more to improve its image and be seen to be above party politics.

## About MDP

The Municipal Development Partnership for Sub-Saharan Africa was launched in 1991 as a multi year partnership between municipal governments and associated institutions and bilateral and multilateral donors. The Partnership was designed to be an alternative model of development assistance, operating regionally and nationally, dedicated to building local institutional effectiveness in Sub Saharan Africa. The Partnership is organised in two units both of which share the same objectives and methodologies. The Eastern and Southern Africa unit covers 25 countries and is based in Harare Zimbabwe. The Western and Central Africa Unit covers 22 countries and is based in Cotonou Benin

## About the Authors

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