

The Zimbabwe growth point phenomenon

Impact and implications on public service delivery

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the phenomenon of growth points in Zimbabwe. The growth point strategy *inter alia* aims to decongest urban centres by elevating some business centres to growth point status in order to curb rural and urban migration with work opportunities and the provision of basic essential services available at growth points. The growth point strategy was first introduced in Zimbabwe soon after independence in 1980 with the aim of transforming rural service and business centres into vibrant economic hubs for rural development. Consequently, some public services traditionally found in towns and cities have been decentralised to enable local communities to access such services at the growth points. Residential areas were also established at the growth points in order to accommodate business expansion. Only a few of the more than 50 growth points located in different provinces of the country have been successful.

Nevertheless, the idea which captured the euphoria of independence ushered in serious challenges on public service delivery at the newly established growth centres. The article also identifies the constraints that hamper effective and efficient public service delivery at growth points and attempts to determine the impact and implications of the growth point policy on public service delivery. It provides some solutions for the revival and resuscitation of the growth point strategy to reduce urban congestion. The strategy augurs very well with the aspirations of rural communities

and has the potential of transforming them into 'nave-centres' of economic development.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The growth point concept in Zimbabwe is well documented. However, there is need for more research on the impact and implications of the strategy on service delivery at the growth centres. The emerging challenges at growth points have been obscured by the desire to curb rural to urban migration. People migrate from the rural areas to towns and cities in search of employment. Equally important for rural communities is the provision of better services. This rural to urban migration has contributed to congestion in urban centres and public service delivery has also suffered from the influx of job seekers. The demand for accommodation has risen thereby promoting the construction of illegal structures and social ills tend to flourish in congested residential areas. Cognisant of the challenges and dangers that could arise from rural to urban migration the Government of Zimbabwe mooted the growth point strategy.

As noted above, the growth point strategy was also aimed at decongesting the urban centres as it was anticipated that the strategy would result in the decline of rural – urban migration. Local industries and other business enterprises relocating to the designated growth points would create employment opportunities for local communities. Soon after the adoption of the growth point policy, several researchers highlighted and articulated the various benefits to local communities that would accrue from the growth point policy, yet a number of reports have appeared in the local media highlighting stagnation and even decline at various growth points. Researchers are prompted to find out what went wrong with the growth point policy as it seems that the once promising growth point strategy has not performed as expected. Failure by local authorities to lure investors and maintain existing infrastructure have undermined the early gains of the strategy and currently most growth points lie dormant.

The article is qualitative and based on a conceptual and theoretical overview by way of a comprehensive literature study. Available literature on the growth point strategy was systematically reviewed to determine the status of different growth points. The strength of the research approach is that the data are purposefully organised into a conceptually relevant format that enhances understanding of the subject. The conceptual research approach relies on descriptive data including online secondary literature, specifically governmental

publications, newspaper articles and journal articles. Thereafter, a thorough comparison of the expected and actual performance was made in order to glean the impact of the policy on public service delivery to the local and surrounding communities.

RATIONALE FOR ESTABLISHING GROWTH POINTS

Although the term 'growth point' is widely used in Zimbabwe there is no universal agreement on its meaning (Sibanda 1985:162). For some people growth points were carefully selected based on their potential to stimulate industrial growth and employment opportunities. Others view them as service centres only elevated to growth point status based on political considerations. Moyo (cited by Munzwa and Jonga 2010:130) defines a growth point as "a centre with an identifiable resource base capable of stimulating specific production and marketing activities." The term 'growth point' according to Manyanhaire, Rwafa and Mutangadura (2011:1), entails increasing the size, number of facilities, infrastructure and services provided at an identified centre. Thus rural centres designated for such growth are commonly known as growth points in Zimbabwe. These centres are sometimes referred to as either 'growth centres' or 'growth poles'. A growth point can generally be defined as a settlement which central and local government consider has potential for development and hence needs to be supported by further public and private sector investment (Wekwete 1988:5). The centre can either be in a rural or urban area. Thus a growth point can be described as a rural or urban settlement with the potential to grow into a town and eventually into a city.

Manyanhaire, Mhishi, Sivotwa and Sithole (2009:509) observe that "In Zimbabwe, the concept of growth poles, or growth points, was actually introduced before independence as part of a policy document called 'Integrated Plan for Rural Development,' that was introduced in 1978." Mawere, Mbindi and Chirevo (2012:194) concur with this observation. However, it is interesting to note that although the growth point concept has its origins in the colonial era, it was popularised soon after independence in 1980. Gasper (1988:425) observes that the term 'growth points' acquired an aura of magic after the attainment of independence, especially in the rural areas.

The colonial government first introduced the concept of growth points with a view to decentralise administrative functions. The few rural centres designated to perform administrative functions were created to enable central administration to reach out to rural communities. However, it must be noted that the thrust was not on rural development hence there was no development with equity. There were also very few growth centres throughout the country. The new government

was determined to eradicate the inequalities that existed prior to the attainment of independence so that rural communities could also access basic essential services. “Critical government services were to be provided at the centre with a view to effectively and efficiently serve the rural population” in order to set a wave of modernisation (Manyanhaire *et al.* 2009:518). The government was committed to bringing service delivery closer to the rural communities. This commitment can best be understood when viewed in relation to the promises made to rural communities during the armed struggle; that of providing better public service delivery to the marginalised rural communities. The new government had an obligation to correct the colonial social and economic imbalances through the promotion of equitable development.

After independence the new government, propelled by its majority rule philosophy, increased the number of growth points throughout the country. The mandate and scope of these growth points also significantly changed. Independence brought among other freedoms, the freedom of movement. The relaxation of the regulations on movement saw many job seekers flocking to towns and cities in search of employment. The sudden influx of people to the urban areas could be partly explained by the relaxation of some repressive laws such as the *Vagrancy Act* of 1968 and the *Areas Accommodation Act* (1972) which did not allow free movement of blacks into urban areas and permanent residence of black people in certain areas (Chirisa and Dumba 2012:6). Those already in employment could now stay with their families, something which was not allowed under colonial administration. It should be noted that under colonial rule, accommodation in urban areas was designed to cater for a small population and families of working people were expected to stay in the rural areas. People also moved to towns and cities in search of better services which were unavailable in rural communities. The sudden and rapid rural to urban migration created a strain on urban facilities which, as already mentioned, were meant for a small population thereby creating an enormous challenge for service delivery. It was envisaged that soon sewage systems would start bursting due to excessive loads while the provision for clean water would be compromised due to high consumption levels.

The government mooted the idea of transforming some business centres deemed to have potential for growth into growth points. The decision is commonly referred to as the growth point strategy. The mandate of the growth points was to lure investors who would in turn create much needed employment. As a result some potential job seekers would have alternative places from which to seek employment rather than relying only on urban centres. The assumption was that the establishment of growth points would allow an agglomeration of economic activities such as industries, commercial and trading functions and service functions (Sibanda 1985:172). Those coming from the neighbourhood

could actually commute to work from their rural homes thereby keeping families and communities intact but at the same time contributing to national development. The immediate challenge, however, was to make the growth points accessible by improving road networks. The provision of residential stands to ease accommodation woes was made a priority. There was also a need to establish industries so that whatever the rural folk wanted from towns and cities became locally available. Mawere *et al.* (2012:194) point out that by establishing growth points the government of Zimbabwe aimed to provide at these growth points all the facilities found in towns and cities such as electricity, tap water, tarred roads, banks and industries; among others.

Cognisant of the social ills of urban congestion, the government adopted the growth point strategy as a panacea to overcrowding in urban centres. Decentralisation would promote rural development by emphasising growth with equity. Government services offered in urban areas could now be accessed at growth points. Thus the move was not only aimed at easing congestion but also on improving public service delivery in rural areas. Establishing growth points was a development strategy meant to improve the image and attractiveness of communal areas as potential investment areas (Wekwete 1988:6). The growth point policy was well received by the once marginalised rural communities.

GOVERNMENT INCENTIVES

The government demonstrated its commitment to the growth point strategy by coming up with incentives for those companies willing to establish industries at growth points. Companies which showed interest in taking up the investment initiatives were entitled to a reduction on income tax and sales tax exemptions for the purchase of capital equipment (Wekwete 1988:6). The main aim of the incentives was to attract potential entrepreneurs who were interested in establishing industries at growth points. The government envisaged an overwhelming response from industry and commerce. Apart from tax reductions, the government also sought to attract potential investors through physical development of the designated growth points. The emerging growth points received public sector investment funds to enable them to embark on infrastructural development. The public sector investment fund given to local authorities for the improvement of physical and social infrastructure such as water reticulation, internal roads, sewage, electricity and other community services was estimated at \$60 million between 1983/4-1985/6 (Wekwete 1988:5, Chirisa and Dumba 2012:6). Government believes that the availability of clean water, electricity, road networks and other community services will

transform growth points into potential investment destinations for existing and aspiring business entrepreneurs.

Despite government assistance with infrastructural development some growth points still have very poor road networks and the roads are not well-serviced. Thus the provision of infrastructure and communication networks at some growth points and within the service region has remained relatively inferior (Sibanda 1985:172). This has made it difficult for the local authorities to woo investors. Chikwanha-Dzenga (1999:40) concludes that the growth points developed into a bottomless pit that consumed national resources without achieving the envisaged benefits. Local communities shunned the growth points and the migration to urban centres continued unabated. Thus the growth point strategy has not been a panacea to both unemployment and rapid urbanisation. According to Nelson Chenga (*The Financial Gazette* 19 July 2012), failure by growth points to reduce migration into large cities has resulted in Harare experiencing swift growth thereby causing a ripple effect on water and sanitation facilities.

IMPACT ON PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

As already intimated, the growth point strategy initially had a positive impact on service delivery by bringing it closer to the people. The government demonstrated its support by assisting growth points with funds for electricity, water reticulation and road rehabilitation. Schools, hospitals, government buildings, retail shops and grain marketing depots were established at various growth centres. Nevertheless, the strategy failed to realise its intended objectives as in some instances local communities did not support the strategy on the grounds that local leadership had not been consulted. Some of the rural folk perceived growth points as serving different segments of society hence they remained alienated from participating in their economic growth (Chikwanha-Dzenga 1999:40). The once promising growth points have been crippled by diminishing budget allocations. The national economic crisis has had a negative impact on the operations and administration of growth points throughout the country. Given that Zimbabwe's economy is agro-based, the decline of agricultural activities following the *fast track* land reform left many growth points without any economic base to sustain the developmental activities (Manyanhaire *et al.* 2009:518). A mishandled or miscalculated growth point policy may result in low returns to large public investments in physical infrastructure and an eventual crisis of disappointed investors (Gasper 1988:429). The overall impact of the growth point strategy has been characterised by poor service delivery of social goods and services to the rate payers, which service delivery

manifests itself through lack of capacity to collect garbage timeously, inability to provide clean water and poor road maintenance. Floyd Kadete observed that there was no way growth points could have survived economic challenges that prevailed in the country in the recent past, which affected even the industries in major cities, forcing some to simply close down (*NewsDay Zimbabwe* 28 November 2011).

Achievements

Although the growth point strategy has failed to live up to its billing, it registered a few successes soon after its inception, chief among which was the ability to bring some basic services closer to local communities. Rural households who used to travel long distances to secure birth or death certificates can now obtain them at their nearest growth point. Relevant government departments were decentralised in order to make basic essential services available locally and the major beneficiaries of the growth point strategy were the farmers. Farmers can also sell their produce at growth points instead of travelling to towns and cities in search of markets thereby resulting in capitalisation of profits. Vending tends to dominate economic activities at growth points which broadens the income base of the people by reducing poverty levels (Chigonda 2010:329). The livelihood of the local people generally improved following the establishment of small business enterprises at the growth points. Unfortunately though, the small businesses are not labour intensive and can only absorb unskilled labour with the educated still finding their way into towns and cities in search of employment.

The growth point strategy has been instrumental to the rural electrification program. Some institutions and individual homesteads have been connected to the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) grid; communication networks also improved in areas surrounding the growth points. New schools and health centres were established in the new residential areas and because the growth points could provide basic essential services, they managed to attract and retain skilled staff. Idleness on the part of unemployed youths was greatly reduced as they could be locally employed. However, according to Manyanhaire *et al.* (2011:8), the successes of the growth point strategy were limited and temporary due to poor implementation of the policy.

Emerging challenges

The physical expansion of growth points and gradual urbanisation meant that there had to be an introduction of other essential services such as garbage collection, street lighting, road maintenance and access to clean water and

sanitation facilities. Adequate provision of these services has proven to be difficult for the local authorities. Due to inadequate resources and under funding from central government, the maintenance of local roads has not been undertaken regularly hence the few tarred roads are now full of potholes and have not only become an eyesore but dangerous to motorists. There is an inadequate water supply at many of these growth points which is not surprising as the taps have no running water. Most growth points are located in the middle of the rural areas where there are no significant water bodies and in cases where there are no dams, water is drawn from rivers and is barely enough for domestic consumption during the dry season. It should be noted that under the colonial system, rural communities were driven to areas with little rainfall activity' thus to a large extent water and sanitation has been neglected due to persistent water woes. While it is important to constantly remove garbage from residential areas, the state of affairs at most growth points suggests that regular refuse collection is no longer a priority. Manyanhaire *et al.* (2011:5) conclude that the growth point strategy is not a panacea for rural development in Zimbabwe given that even in other parts of the world, the strategy has had limited success.

Limited space for expansion has also become a major threat to expansion at some growth centres. Some villages surrounding the growth points have not been willing to release part of their land to cater for the expanding growth points. According to Nelson Chenga (*The Financial Gazette* 19 July 2012), villagers in Mupandawana refused to give up land they were occupying for Mupandawana Growth Point's expansion even after they had been advised that the land they were occupying was part of the growth point's master plan. The boundary between the growth points and local villages has become unnecessarily obscured and overlapping. Unattended cattle, goats and donkeys have become a common sight at some growth points and their presence has become a cause for concern to motorists and other road users. These unattended animals also pose a serious threat to recreational facilities.

However, a major and worrisome trend is that from its inception, the growth point strategy has failed to attract investors as initially anticipated. Big private companies shunned the growth points despite incentives promised by government to those who might relocate to the designated growth points. They cited viability problems as the buying power of local communities fluctuates throughout the year and is seasonal. When the local communities have very little to sell, their purchasing power also diminishes. The small shops, public institutions and grain marketing depots dotted at various growth points across the country could not generate enough employment opportunities to absorb school leavers. The usual trend in agro-based economies is that when there is a decline in the agricultural sector, the performance of the growth points also declines because the economic activities of growth points are mainly anchored

on the interaction between growth points and the surrounding farming communities (Manyanhaire *et al.* 2011:6).

Thus the absence of viable economic activities at growth points meant less employment opportunities. Consequently these growth points have failed to sustain themselves. The problems of growth points have been compounded by limited central government funding which has continued to dwindle over the years (Gasper 1988:441, Wekwete 1988:13). Some buildings became obsolete well before construction was even completed while some of those which were completed have failed to remain operational due to viability problems. The dilapidated structures at some of the growth points have become havens for criminal activities and it is against this backdrop that the once popular growth points continue to experience poor and deplorable service delivery.

The implications of the growth point strategy are that growth centres gradually assume urban characteristics hence the need for corresponding public service delivery. In the absence of better services the growth point strategy cannot curb rural to urban migration. Under such circumstances, job seekers and investors shun the growth points and resources spent on infrastructural development will be wasted. The price of goods and commodities offered in retail outlets at growth points is much higher than that offered in urban areas due to transport costs (Wekwete 1988:13), thus the emerging challenges have resulted in poor service delivery at the once popular growth points. The advent of the current economic crisis that resulted in companies retrenching some of their employees saw growth points being overcrowded with desperate job seekers trying to earn a living by whatever means possible.

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE STRATEGY

Several lessons can be learnt from the growth centre strategy. There are a number of things that could have been done differently in order for the strategy to realise its objectives. Before adopting the concept, the authorities should have done proper feasibility studies to determine the most sustainable economic activities for each growth point. Even though Zimbabwe has an agro-based economy, there was a need to establish industries that process the particular crop that is common in the areas surrounding the growth point. Villagers in Mutoko for example, are well known for growing tomatoes and nearly every homestead has a mango orchard. It would have made economic sense if companies which process tomatoes and mangos were the ones given incentives to relocate to Mutoko Growth Point. The move would not only have created employment but also reduced the costs of transporting the unprocessed goods. Bigboy Marumahoko suggests that food processing companies should

help create employment opportunities by coming closer to where they get their raw materials through the decentralisation process (*NewsDay Zimbabwe* 28 November 2011).

Similarly the quarrying activities in Mutoko District should have been harnessed at the onset to benefit local communities by processing the black granite rock at Mutoko Growth Point. That way the growth point strategy would have managed to curb rural to urban migration while sustaining its economic activities. The absence of value addition or processing of the rock at Mutoko Growth Point means that the jobs that could have been created at the growth point were only created in Harare where the rock is further processed (Chigonda 2010:329). A performing growth point has the potential to prioritise public service delivery because resources will be available.

Unfortunately some of the growth points were established with a very small resource base and such growth points have not only remained stagnant but they have also failed to attract investors (Munzwa and Jonga 2010:130). According to Sibanda (1985:163), a real growth point “is one where there is a symbiotic relationship between the centre and the hinterland, or service region.” Effective planning should take into account the views of the public who are ultimately the consumers of the goods and services from the growth point strategy. The growth point policy has not been a grassroots development initiative. Chikwanha-Dzenga (1999:40) observes that politics determined the location of some growth points and this approach did not augur well with some rural communities who simply shunned them while they had been established to improve rural livelihoods.

Some centres were designated ‘growth points’ on political grounds rather than on the current economic base, thus they failed to attract any form of meaningful investment, and as a result have not been functional (Chirisa and Dumba 2012:6). The strategy evolved from the top yet it was widely expected to address rural developmental issues (Sibanda 1985:173). Public participation is a stage in the planning process that cannot be wished away; once the public has been involved from the initiation stage, it develops ownership and renders support. When the local communities have an appreciation of the benefits and intended beneficiaries, they make every growth point strategy unique because expectations, local skills and resources available, will be different from one growth point to the other. With public participation, the Mupandawana local community for example, could have supported the physical expansion of Mupandawana Growth Point by ceding part of their land for its expansion.

While the need for the establishment of growth points was a noble government intervention, the government needed to begin with fewer growth points. According to Manyanhaire *et al.* (2011:8), the government of Zimbabwe was over ambitious in designating more than 50 centres as growth points at a time

when there were no experienced institutions. The government should have only weaned these local authorities after an evaluation of each growth point's ability to sustain its activities subsequent to the withdrawal of government support.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main aim of this article was to discuss the reason behind the establishment of growth points in Zimbabwe's rural areas and the effect the policy had on public service delivery. From the literature reviewed, it can be concluded that the growth point strategy has potential to stimulate rural development while at the same time promoting efficient public service delivery. Nevertheless, individual growth points have failed to embark on major projects capable of creating jobs for the youths, as anticipated. As a result the jobless youths continue to migrate to major towns and cities in search of formal employment. Thus the need to resuscitate dormant growth points cannot be over emphasised. The strategy has the potential to work in other developing countries prioritising rural development and self-reliance. However, governments must avoid a 'one shoe fits all' approach when establishing growth points. Different growth points have varying potential and capacity for self-sustenance. This uniqueness must be thoroughly investigated before a business centre is elevated to a growth point.

Available literature shows that some of the business centres were granted growth point status before a comprehensive study of relevant and viable economic activities necessary for their self-sustenance was conducted. The current confusion between a rural township and a growth point has to be clarified to enable local communities to appreciate the value and position of growth points in the human settlement hierarchy. It could be asserted that the stagnation of growth points subsequently has a bearing on the quality of public service delivery hence the urgent need to revise and resuscitate the strategy.

This article offers some recommendations based on the assumption that the growth point strategy can transform local communities into lively and self-sustaining economic entities. The strategy is not only applicable to Zimbabwe; the findings and recommendations can also work in other countries in Africa which are experiencing similar challenges.

The growth point policy is an initiative that can still be resuscitated and invigorated to achieve rural development. The recommendations are informed by lessons learnt from the growth point strategy. The government should commission comprehensive research into the challenges facing growth points across the country. Government should study the findings and rope in local communities in the search for a lasting solution to the peculiar challenges of individual growth points. Local authorities and communities should work

together very closely, with the former providing technocrats, while the latter provides robust and innovative councillors well versed with local development issues. Consultations cultivate a culture of reciprocity and cooperation.

Further decline of growth centres with potential to establish industries and create employment opportunities can be stopped through capital injection. Economic activities should be relevant to the resources available at different growth points. The variation should be determined by the growth point's resource endowments, and the dominant livelihood activities practised in the locality (Paradza 2010:8). The Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises Development and the Ministry of Youths Development, Indigenisation and Empowerment should play an active role in supporting the jobless youths with their business ventures. They should encourage the youths to establish business ventures at growth points instead of shunning them and supporting well established towns and cities.

Government should engage all stakeholders in the growth point strategy in order to establish and address the pitfalls of the growth point policy. Constructive engagement should help allay the fears of the private sector to relocate to designated growth points. The private sector will also have an opportunity to advise government on what incentives would attract industry and commerce. With vibrant economic activities, the growth points can generate income for effective and efficient public service delivery to rate payers.

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