



Interrogating multi-level government power dynamics and cooperation in Zimbabwe: Evidence from Harare City Council

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Multi-level
Local governments
Decentralisation
Cooperation
National government
Devolved

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between Zimbabwe's national government and the Harare City Council (HCC) in managing the city's public affairs. It explores how this interaction influences governance in Harare, drawing on the theory of intergovernmental relations. Through document analysis, the study dissects the structure and nature of the system between the two spheres of government. The findings reveal a strained relationship, largely due to power imbalances, with instances where the national government has encroached on local government responsibilities. Despite these challenges, the paper concludes with an optimistic outlook, suggesting that both levels of government can achieve their shared goals by fostering trust, cooperation, and collaboration, and by nurturing a more effective intergovernmental framework.

1. Introduction

The article examines the national government of Zimbabwe and the Harare City Council, the local body responsible for managing the civic affairs of Harare, the capital city. It seeks to interrogate signs of vibrant and effective intergovernmental co-existence, cooperation, and collaboration aimed at enhancing public sector performance. In the same spirit, it also explores the power dynamics between these two governance systems operating at different levels. Against this backdrop, it defines power dynamics as the relationships, authority, and influence between different levels of government (local, regional, national, and sometimes international) in shaping and implementing policies, making decisions, and allocating resources. It argues that the power dynamics between two levels of government are potentially shaped by the balance of authority, control over resources, autonomy, and the need for coordination. These dynamics can either foster cooperative governance or lead to tension and conflict, depending on how responsibilities and powers are distributed, communicated, and respected.

The article taps into the argument that analysing decentralisation, multi-level governance, and intergovernmental relations requires considering the effectiveness and inter-relationships between public sector stakeholders across these levels. In this context, it situates the various dimensions of decentralisation and intergovernmental relations

within the broader multilevel governance framework. According to the World Bank (2022), the shift from decentralisation to multi-level governance reflects a broader understanding of governance complexities and the need for more coordinated, flexible, and responsive systems of governance. While decentralisation involves the transfer of powers and responsibilities from a central government to local or regional authorities, multi-level governance goes a step further by emphasizing collaboration and coordination between multiple levels of government—local, regional, national, and sometimes even international—rather than a simple delegation of authority.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) discusses the shift from decentralisation to multi-level governance as a response to the growing complexity of governance in a globalised world. It highlights that while decentralisation has been a key strategy to improve local autonomy and service delivery, it often leads to fragmented governance and challenges in coordination. The shift to multi-level governance, according to the OECD (2019), addresses these issues by fostering greater collaboration and coordination between various levels of government—local, regional, and national. The OECD (2019) emphasizes that multi-level governance enhances policy coherence, aligns local needs with national priorities, and promotes more responsive governance by involving multiple stakeholders at different levels.

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The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) recognises the shift from decentralisation to multi-level governance as a critical evolution in governance practices aimed at improving the effectiveness and responsiveness of government systems. According to the UNDP, while decentralisation was initially seen as a way to bring government closer to the people and address local needs, it often resulted in uneven development, a lack of coordination, and fragmented decision-making. The shift to multi-level governance, as highlighted by the UNDP (2023), emphasizes the importance of collaboration between different levels of government—local, regional, and national—in tackling complex issues such as climate change, urbanisation, and inequality. Several other factors are said to have driven the shift from decentralisation to multi-level governance. Many modern challenges, such as climate change, migration, public health, and economic inequality, transcend local or national boundaries. Multi-level governance recognises that solving such problems requires cooperation and integrated action across different governmental levels (Daniell & Kay, 2017; World Bank, 2022). Decentralisation alone often falls short because local governments may lack the resources or mandate to address these complex, interdependent issues.

By involving multiple levels of government, multi-level governance ensures policies are more responsive to the needs of different regions and communities, enabling tailored solutions. Local governments, closer to the people, can address specific issues more effectively, while national governments can maintain consistency and long-term vision (Enderlein, Wälti, & Zürn, 2011). Multi-level governance promotes shared responsibility, which can lead to better accountability. Since multiple levels of government are involved, there is greater transparency and oversight. This can also enhance inclusiveness, as it facilitates citizen participation at various levels, ensuring that local, regional, and national perspectives are all taken into account (World Bank, 2003). While decentralisation often transfers administrative responsibilities, it does not always guarantee sufficient funding or resources for local governments to carry out those responsibilities. Multi-level governance models often include mechanisms for resource sharing and financial coordination, where national governments can support local governments through grants, transfers, or shared budgets, ensuring more equitable development (Council of Europe, 2023).

Existing literature on intergovernmental relations in Zimbabwe has largely overlooked the specific dynamics of multi-level governance, particularly in relation to the Harare City Council (HCC), the local authority responsible for governing the capital. While some studies have addressed central-local government conflicts in broad terms (e.g., Chigwata, Marumahoko, & Madhekeni, 2019), they often neglect the intricate power relations and daily interactions between the national government and the HCC. This oversight leaves a gap in understanding how these dynamics affect the council's ability to meet the needs of Harare's rapidly growing population. The article aims to fill that gap by examining the nuanced power dynamics between the HCC and the central government, offering a clearer understanding of how intergovernmental relations influence Harare's governance. In doing so, it seeks to provide valuable insights into the practical challenges the city council faces in delivering public services and improving the welfare of its residents.

The article is organised and structured as follows: introduction; organisation, interrogating the multi-level/local governance interface, state contestations and urban management in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe government and Harare City Council in perspective, centralisation of urban functions and conclusions. Document analysis was chosen as the preferred research methodology for the topic under research. Document analysis has several advantages that make it a useful research method, especially when studying multi-level government systems. One advantage is that it can provide a more objective view of the topic, since documents are not as influenced by bias as personal interviews or surveys (Bowen, 2009).

Another advantage is that documents can provide a wealth of

information about the topic, since they often contain detailed records and statistics. Finally, document analysis is a relatively inexpensive research method, since most documents are already available and do not require additional resources to collect (Merriam, 1988). The article does not incorporate Harare Metropolitan Council into its discourse on multi-level governmental system for the reason that it is not yet in existence, even though it is mentioned in Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution as one of the country's two metropolitan councils, the other being Bulawayo Metropolitan Council. The national government has not yet carried out the constitutional directive to implement it and the delay may be associated with the fact that Harare Metropolitan Province has in most cases been controlled by opposition political parties, as is also the case with Bulawayo Metropolitan Councils, which is also not yet established.

2. Interrogating the multi-level/local governance Interface

There are several potential approaches to structuring a research topic on multi-level government, cooperation and Zimbabwe's Harare City Council. The Multilevel Governance and Decentralisation for Delivery Programme (MDDP) has advanced the curate global knowledge that seek to strengthen World Bank support to client governments working at the intersection of decentralisation, multilevel governance, and sector delivery (World Bank Group, 2023). It is the conviction of this paper that the World Bank Group would provide a framework for best practices on multi-level government and cooperation. In the Zimbabwean context and drawing from the World Bank Group, the best approach would be to explore the concept of multi-level governance focusing on a specific issue, such as water and sanitation, and explore how the multi-level government structure affects the council's ability to address this issue, citing in this case on the relationship between the Harare City Council and the national government, and how their relationship has affected the council's ability to carry out its responsibilities. The article focuses on the latter.

The OECD (2019) has roundly summarised the interface between the national government and its subnational appendages by insinuating that:

governments at all levels are searching for solutions to improve the quality of public services, the effectiveness of public investment and the fiscal sustainability of public finances through co-ordinated arrangements between national, regional and local governments, as well as across jurisdictions, are needed, along with subnational capacity building.

This has brought to the fore the issue of synergies between the two spheres of government and the interdependence nature of their relationship. The theory of intergovernmental relations posits that the different levels of government are not isolated from each other, but rather interact and influence each other in a variety of ways. The interactions can be cooperative or conflictual, and can affect the programmes and policies that are implemented. There are several key features of the theory of intergovernmental relations which include autonomy in decision-making power; interdependence yet being able to work together to achieve common goals; the need for cooperation and collaboration between different levels of government, rather than simply dividing up power and authority as well as recognising the balance of power and authority between the different levels of government is changing constantly and evolving (Poirier, Saunders, & Kincaid, 2016).

Ostrom (1971) explores a polycentric approach to governance, which includes multiple levels of authority and decision-making. In this approach, local communities are given the authority to make decisions about the use of common resources, and are held accountable for the results of their decisions. Ostrom's polycentric approach is similar to the theory of intergovernmental relations in that it recognises the importance of multiple levels of government and decision-making. In addition, Ostrom (1971) emphasizes the importance of a "bottom-up" approach to governance, in which local communities are given the power to make

decisions about their own resources. This is in contrast to the traditional “top-down” approach, in which decisions are made by a central authority.

Derthick (2008) offers a different perspective on intergovernmental relations, arguing that the traditional theory is too simplistic and that it does not accurately reflect the complexity of the relationships between different levels of government. Derthick argues that it is more accurate to think of a multiple government system as a “muddle” of overlapping and interdependent relationships (Derthick, 2008). Orren (2010) argues that the concept of “possibility” is central to understanding intergovernmental relations. Orren's main argument is that the modern political environment is characterised by a clash of values, which makes compromise difficult. However, she argues that it is still possible to find common ground and compromise between different levels of government, despite the competing values and interests that often exist. She also suggests that policymaking should be viewed as an ongoing process, rather than a static event, and that it is possible to find solutions that balance competing values (Orren, 2010).

In the Zimbabwean context, the relationship between the national government of Zimbabwe and the Harare City Council has been marked by a power struggle, with the national government often exerting a significant amount of influence over the council. This has been characterised by uneven power dynamics, notably, a lack of shared values, increasingly blurred boundaries of different levels of government, a clash of values and opinion, overlapping functions, and absence of clarity in the division of power. This has most likely impacted service delivery in the city, as the council has had to deal with interference from the national government. Using the theory of intergovernmental relations, the article focuses on how the national government's interaction with the Harare City Council has impacted its ability to undertake its duties and responsibilities.

The 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe in Chapter 5 organises government into three tiers. These are: (a) national government, (b) provincial and metropolitan councils, and (c) local authorities; divided into urban and rural councils (see Table 1). Urban councils are assigned the responsibility to represent and manage the affairs of people in urban areas; and rural councils undertake similar functions within the districts into which the provinces are divided (Section 5 (c) of the Constitution of

Zimbabwe). The national government consists of the central government, which is based in Harare, the capital. At the national level, there are three branches of government: the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. The executive is headed by the president, who is elected for a five-year term. The legislature consists of the Senate and the National Assembly (Section 118 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe). The Senate has 80 members, 60 of whom are elected and 20 are appointed by the president (Section 120 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe). The National Assembly has 270 members, 210 of whom are elected and 60 are appointed by the president (Section 124 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe). The president appoints ministers and deputy ministers from among the members of the National Assembly and the Senate.

The constitution recognises 10 provinces in Zimbabwe, which are named after the 10 main geographical regions of the country. These are Manicaland, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland West, Mashonaland East, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Midlands, Masvingo, Harare and Bulawayo (Section 267 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe). Out of the 10 provinces, Mashonaland Central is the smallest, with an area of 25,196 km², while Midlands is the largest, with an area of 76,704 km². Of Zimbabwe's 10 provinces, eight are regional (rural) provinces and two are metropolitan provinces. It also follows that the country has eight provincial councils and two metropolitan councils. Ten members of each provincial council and metropolitan council are elected under a system of proportional representation. All members of the national parliament are members of the provincial or metropolitan council in which their constituency is based (Section 268 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe). The chairpersons of these provincial governments are elected by members of the Council from among their own numbers and are elected for a five-year term and can be re-elected for a second term.

The constitution also provides for local government, divided into rural district councils and urban local authorities (Section 5 (c) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe). Zimbabwe has 92 local government councils, of which 32 are urban councils. The Constitution provides that the minister of local government is responsible for overseeing the work of local government councils and ensuring that they are functioning properly. This includes ensuring that the councils are financially sound, that they are delivering services in accordance with the law, and that they are acting in accordance with the principles of good governance. In addition, the minister is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the performance of local government councils and for providing guidance and assistance to them.

The interaction between the national government, provincial and metropolitan councils, and local authorities is structured to facilitate governance and service delivery at various levels. National government is the highest level of government and is responsible for creating national policies, laws, and frameworks that guide governance throughout the country. It sets the overall direction for development, allocates resources, and oversees the implementation of policies. Provincial and metropolitan councils act as a bridge between the national government and local authorities. They are responsible for coordinating development efforts within their respective regions, implementing national policies at the provincial level, and addressing regional needs. They also manage resources allocated from the national government and ensure that local authorities align with national priorities.

Divided into urban and rural councils, local authorities are responsible for local governance and the delivery of services such as health, education, and infrastructure. They implement policies developed by the provincial councils and ensure that community needs are met. Local authorities have some degree of autonomy but must operate within the frameworks set by both the national and provincial governments. The interaction among them is facilitated through various tools. One of these is through policy implementation where national policies are communicated to provincial councils, which then adapt and implement them at the local level through urban and rural councils. This creates a chain of command and ensures consistency in governance.

Table 1
Spatial organisation of Zimbabwe's governance system.

Organisation	#	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, Umguza, 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: Marumahoko (2023a)

Another interaction mechanism is through resource allocation where the national government allocates funds to provincial councils, which in turn distribute resources to local authorities based on needs and priorities. This system requires cooperation to ensure effective use of resources. An additional interaction mechanism is feedback where local authorities provide feedback to provincial councils on community needs and challenges, which can influence provincial and national policy adjustments. This bottom-up approach helps ensure that governance is responsive to local conditions. Yet another mechanism is through capacity building where the national government often engages in capacity-building initiatives to enhance the effectiveness of provincial and local governments, fostering better service delivery. Overall, the interaction between these three levels of government is essential for cohesive governance, enabling policies to be effectively implemented and local needs to be addressed.

3. State contestations and urban management in Zimbabwe

[Kamete \(2006\)](#) explores the complexities of urban governance in Zimbabwe, focusing on the struggles between the central government and local authorities over the management of the country's urban spaces. Kamete argues that Zimbabwe's urban areas, particularly its cities, are in a state of decline due to a combination of political, economic, and institutional challenges. He critically examines the state of urban governance and the wider socio-political environment in Zimbabwe, highlighting how these dynamics are shaping urban life and contributing to the “fading” of the country's cities. Kamete frames the urban crisis in Zimbabwe as the “fading” of cities, where urban centers like Harare, Bulawayo, and others are experiencing a decline in infrastructure, service delivery, and governance. The article reflects on how Zimbabwe's cities, once symbols of modernity and progress, are now marked by decaying infrastructure, poor service delivery, and increasing informal settlements. Kamete argues that these problems are not just administrative failures but are deeply linked to political and economic crises that have plagued the country for decades.

The article by [Masvaure \(2016\)](#) examines the challenges and limitations of public participation in the local government budget formulation process in Harare, Zimbabwe. The author explores how citizens are involved (or rather excluded) from decision-making processes that affect their daily lives, particularly in terms of urban planning and resource allocation. The article highlights how marginalized and vulnerable groups—such as women, the urban poor, and informal sector workers—are particularly excluded from the decision-making processes, further entrenching inequality in the allocation of public resources. It is said that these groups often face additional barriers such as limited literacy, economic hardship, and lack of time, which prevent them from engaging in budget discussions. Masvaure notes that the lack of effective public participation in the budget formulation process undermines the legitimacy of local governance in Harare. As a result, Masvaure notes that urban planning and resource allocation do not adequately reflect the needs or priorities of the city's residents. The failure to incorporate citizen input into budgeting is seen exacerbating issues like poor service delivery, inadequate infrastructure, and social inequality.

[Muchadenyika and Williams \(2016, 2020\)](#) analyse the role of the Zimbabwean state in urban development, noting that government policies often fail to address the needs of urban residents adequately. They highlight the tension between central government policies and local government actions, where the latter often struggle to implement effective urban management strategies due to limited autonomy and resources. The article examines the evolving governance structures in Zimbabwean cities. It critiques the local government system, highlighting how political and institutional factors, including corruption, lack of resources, and inefficiency, have hindered effective urban management and service delivery. The authors also touch on the complex interplay between urbanisation, governance, and social inequality in Zimbabwe, emphasizing how poor governance and economic challenges

have led to suboptimal urban living conditions, while also noting the potential for social movements to drive change.

[Muchadenyika and Williams \(2020\)](#) explore the ongoing tensions between the central government and local authorities in Zimbabwe, particularly in relation to urban governance and management. According to the two authors, these contestations often manifest in disputes over authority, resources, and policy implementation, where central government actors exert significant influence over urban management decisions, sometimes undermining the autonomy of local governments. The article argues that the central-local power struggle has led to inefficiencies in urban management, including poor service delivery, inadequate urban planning, and an inability to address key issues such as housing shortages, infrastructure decay, and informal settlements. The article underscores that local government, constrained by limited resources and central government interference, often fail to meet the growing demands of urban populations. The authors provide a historical perspective on how these central-local state contestations have evolved over time. They discuss the legacy of colonialism, the centralisation of power during the post-independence era, and the political dynamics in Zimbabwe, particularly under the ruling party's long tenure, which have shaped the governance framework and urban management practices.

[Finn and Bandauko \(2024\)](#) investigate the challenges facing Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city, in managing its urban infrastructure amidst decentralisation reforms. The authors focus on the intersection of urban governance, financial constraints, and the growing demands placed on local governments. The article contextualises the infrastructure crisis encountered by HCC within the broader economic and political challenges in Zimbabwe. According to [Finn and Bandauko \(2024\)](#), the economic downturn, high inflation, and political instability have exacerbated the financial difficulties faced by the local government. At the same time, the central government's limited support for urban infrastructure projects and the lack of coordinated policy are said to have contributed to the crisis. One of the central issues identified in the article is the phenomenon of unfunded mandates, where local governments are given new responsibilities (such as managing infrastructure, housing, and public services) without the corresponding financial resources to support these tasks. The authors argue that this mismatch between responsibilities and funding has severely undermined the ability of local authorities in Harare to maintain and develop infrastructure.

[Bandauko and Arku \(2024a\)](#) introduce the concept of prefigurative urbanisation, where social movements and housing cooperatives play a pivotal role in reshaping urban spaces outside formal government structures. In Harare, where urban transformation is often contested, this research offers insights into the way local actors—especially marginalized communities—engage with urban governance. The study's emphasis on housing cooperatives adds an important dimension to the analysis of Harare City Council's governance, showing how cooperative action among citizens can challenge, complement, or conflict with top-down governance strategies. This work helps to deepen the discussion of cooperation (or lack thereof) within Harare's multi-level government power dynamics, providing a framework for understanding how social movements in the city engage with urban transformation and local government.

[Bandauko and Arku \(2024b\)](#) also directly contribute to the investigation by examining the policy and governance challenges that street traders face in Harare. Their work discusses how government policies—at both local and national levels—attempt to regulate, control, or displace street traders, providing a critical lens through which to examine the relationship between local government and citizens. This analysis is crucial as it explores how the power dynamics between Harare City Council and informal traders reflect broader political struggles, affecting cooperation and conflict at multiple levels of governance. It offers evidence of the tension between local government mandates and grassroots actors, such as street traders, which may mirror the larger government cooperation issues the article is exploring.

Bandauko and Arku (2025) also provide an important theoretical framework by discussing how political opportunity structures (POS) influence collective action, particularly within urban environments. The study focuses on street traders' associations in politically volatile settings. It contributes to the article by highlighting the power dynamics within urban governance, particularly in the context of Harare's informal economy. Street traders often face contested governance, which reflects multi-level government power struggles (national vs. local). This research underscores the role of political opportunities in shaping the cooperation and resistance of informal sectors, which is crucial in understanding how Harare's multi-level governance affects local actors.

4. The Zimbabwe Government and Harare City Council in perspective

The local relations between the centre (national government) and the Harare City Council (HCC) in Zimbabwe have evolved significantly from before 2000 to after 2000, influenced by political, economic, and social factors. Before 2000, the Harare City Council was a reflection of ZANU-PF's national dominance, with mayors consistently representing the ruling party (Chigwata et al., 2019). This era saw limited political competition, with ZANU-PF ensuring that its influence extended into local governance, effectively shaping policies and decision-making at the city level. While the Harare City Council operated under significant central government influence before 2000, it nevertheless maintained some degree of local autonomy in its decision-making. This autonomy allowed for a responsiveness to local issues and a capacity to implement initiatives that addressed the specific needs of the community, reflecting the complexities of local governance within a dominant political framework.

After 2000, political dynamics shifted, particularly with the rise of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which gained control of the Harare City Council (HCC). This led to increased tensions with the central government. The central government became more adversarial towards the council, often undermining its authority, leading to a breakdown in communication and cooperation. The economic decline in the 2000s exacerbated tensions, as the council faced significant challenges in service delivery while the central government struggled to provide support. The central government increasingly intervened in local governance, including appointing special task forces to oversee city management, often bypassing elected officials. The autonomy of HCC diminished significantly, as the central government imposed more control over budgets and decision-making processes. The shift from a more cooperative relationship to one characterised by conflict and control highlighted the broader political struggles within Zimbabwe, reflecting the challenges of local governance in the face of centralised authority. This dynamic continues to evolve, influenced by ongoing political developments and economic conditions.

In its interaction with Harare City Council, the national government of Zimbabwe, led by its Ministry of Local Government (MLG), has often sought to control Harare, through legislation, direct intervention and the various intrusive tools at its disposal. For example, invasive legislation is used frequently to tilt the multi-level government system in its favour (see Table 2). Starting 2000, when opposition politics experienced resurgence and all urban local authorities fell to opposition parties, the political party that controls and dominates national politics (ZANU-PF) has been accused of increasingly resorting to the use of hostile measures to impose itself on the local units of government controlled by the opposition. Harare City Council (HCC) has been under the opposition since 2000, seemingly becoming an irritant to the party that controls national politics, which has been losing its foothold with urban voters. Many observers believe the Ministry of Local Government (MLG) is at best reluctant to assist HCC, at worst, it works actively to co-opt it, or to ensure that it does not succeed (RTI International and the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for Zimbabwe, 2010).

Table 2

Examples of the centre's basis for imposing itself on local government.

Act	Section	What national government can do through the MLG
UC	80	Can dismiss a council and replace it with a Commission
UC	91	Enjoys unfettered right to access all council records
UC	116	Approve appointment of senior council staff
UC	233	Can make by-laws on behalf of urban councils
UC	309	Has absolute right to be furnished with certain reports
UC	311	Can appoint investigators and inquire into local issues
UC	313	Can give directions on matters of local policy
UC	314	Can reverse, suspend, and rescind local decisions
UC	315	Can make directives to local government

Source: Marumahoko (2023b)

Several incidents illustrate how the Zimbabwean national government has used its power to intervene in local governance, often overriding the authority of democratically elected local officials. One example is the 2003 suspension of Elias Mudzuri, the Executive Mayor of Harare. Local Government Minister Ignatius Chombo invoked Section 54(2) of the Urban Councils Act to suspend Mudzuri, citing allegations of corruption, abuse of power, improper staff dismissals, and failure to cooperate with the national government (Marumahoko, Afolabi, Sadie, & Nhede, 2020). Despite these accusations being unsubstantiated and Mudzuri being denied an opportunity to defend himself, a Commission of Inquiry, composed of Chombo's allies, found him guilty. Mudzuri was dismissed, and the national government replaced him with a Commission led by Sekesai Makwavarara, a former deputy mayor with ties to the ruling party. This event demonstrated the central government's ability to exert significant control over local governance, undermining the autonomy of Harare's city council.

Another example occurred in 2016 when Chombo suspended Bernard Manyenyeni, the MDC-appointed mayor of Harare, over his alleged failure to follow proper procedures in appointing a new town clerk (Chigwata et al., 2019). Although Manyenyeni denied the charges and was later reinstated following a court challenge, the incident highlighted ongoing tensions between the opposition-run Harare City Council and the national government. Manyenyeni's suspension was viewed as part of a broader pattern of interference by the government in local affairs, particularly in the appointment and removal of local officials. His case underscored the power imbalance between the national and local governments, with the former often overriding local decisions. It also showcased the role of the judiciary in balancing these tensions, as the courts ultimately restored Manyenyeni to office.

A further example of the national government's overreach came in 2020 with the controversial Pomona waste-to-energy deal. The government signed a contract with Geogenix BV to build the facility, despite strong opposition from the Harare City Council, which argued the deal would harm the city's waste management system and result in a loss of revenue (Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2022). The city council filed a court application to block the deal, asserting that it was unconstitutional. However, the government proceeded with the agreement, even as the case was pending. In 2021, the Supreme Court ruled that the deal was illegal and unconstitutional, as it had not been approved by the city council. This ruling was a significant victory for local governance, but it also highlighted the challenges inherent in Zimbabwe's multi-level governance system, where national and local interests often collide. The case raised critical questions about the interpretation of the Urban Councils Act and emphasized the importance of transparency and accountability in government decision-making. These examples reflect broader dynamics within Zimbabwe's multi-level government system, where local authorities frequently find their decisions overridden by the national government. They also illustrate the importance of judicial oversight in maintaining the balance of power and protecting local autonomy.

4.1. Centralisation of urban functions

The centralisation of urban governance in Zimbabwe, particularly in the capital city, Harare, has been a growing trend in recent years (Marumahoko, 2023b). Traditionally, local governments, such as the Harare City Council, were responsible for managing key urban functions, including water supply, sanitation, road maintenance, solid waste management, and public health. These responsibilities fell under the umbrella of local authority powers outlined in Zimbabwe's Constitution and previous legal frameworks (Marumahoko, 2024). However, in response to both economic challenges (including fiscal crises) and political concerns (such as the opposition control of Harare and other urban areas), the central government began to take over or distribute these functions to national ministries, state-owned enterprises, or private sector entities with national government interests. These moves were, at times, framed as necessary to improve service delivery or because local governments lacked the capacity to manage these areas effectively.

For example, Harare's water supply and sanitation management, which were previously under the city's control, were transferred to Zinwa (Zimbabwe National Water Authority), a national parastatal, which is tasked with water provision and managing resources on behalf of the government. Similarly, solid waste management, road construction, and maintenance saw similar transfers to the national level or parastatals like ZINARA (Zimbabwe National Road Administration), which took over national road infrastructure, impacting the local council's ability to maintain roads in the capital. Health care management in Harare was also shifted to national ministries, complicating the previously clear division of responsibilities between the city council and the government.

4.2. The role of state enterprises and private sector involvement

As the central government began to take over local government functions, it often entrusted state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or private sector companies in which the government had a significant interest to carry out these duties. For example, ZESA (Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority) assumed responsibility for energy supply, leaving the local council with limited power to manage public lighting or even address electricity distribution issues (The Zimbabwean, 2011). Zinwa (Zimbabwe National Water Authority) took control of water supply and sanitation, which would have otherwise been managed by the Harare City Council directly (Marumahoko, 2023b). Private contractors or parastatals were tasked with road repairs, while the local government could no longer independently allocate resources or make decisions regarding urban infrastructure. These transfers, while intended to professionalise service delivery, have often led to disjointed governance. The local authority, even when it retains nominal responsibility for urban management, lacks the legal and operational control over key services, resulting in inefficiencies, delays, and a lack of coordination between national and local levels of government. For instance, Harare's capacity to manage urban challenges like waste disposal has been limited by decisions made at the national level by parastatals and private companies, who do not necessarily prioritise local needs.

4.3. Restoration of functions to local authorities

While the central government has taken over many urban governance functions in recent years, some functions have been restored to urban councils. This reversion back to local councils—after a period of centralisation—has been patchy and complicated. The reallocation of power is often inconsistent and subject to the political landscape, leading to further confusion and inefficiency. For example, after a period of dissatisfaction with the performance of state-run agencies or parastatals (such as ZINWA for water), Harare City Council has regained some control over water management (Musemwa, 2019). Similarly, road

construction and waste management have seen local councils taking back responsibility in some instances, although the overlap of functions with national agencies such as ZINARA and ZESA persists. These shifts are often framed as necessary due to inefficiencies at the national level, but they also reflect an acknowledgment that local authorities have a better understanding of local needs and greater responsiveness to urban issues than the central government.

4.4. The issue of overlapping functions: a source of governance complexity

The functions typically assigned urban councils such as Harare City Council by Zimbabwe's Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15) under Schedule 2 include local public services such as fire, public safety, water, sanitation, land use and zoning, infrastructure and public works and social services. In reality, though, a lot of these responsibilities are already partially or fully under the purview of the national government, and other national laws limit their ability to perform these functions on behalf of local governments (ActionAid, 2014). The designation of a function as a local government function does not obligate the national government to discontinue doing it or to transfer authority to local authorities. Some tasks can only be done under the stringent guidelines of the Minister in charge of local administration. In accordance with Sections 7 and 8 of the Act, the Minister may, by statutory instrument, bestow or revoke a council's administration, control, and management of a local government region after consulting the council. It is believed that this section limits local governments' authority to conduct matters as they see fit.

The overlap of functions between the central government and the Harare City Council is a central point of contention. The relationship between the two levels of government is characterised by confusion, lack of clarity, and duplication of efforts. For example, water supply is managed by ZINWA at the national level, yet the local authority is still involved in aspects of water distribution and infrastructure maintenance. This dual system can create bottlenecks when decisions need to be made about expanding or upgrading infrastructure. Road construction and maintenance have traditionally been a joint responsibility, but the presence of ZINARA, a national entity, complicates the roles and responsibilities of Harare City Council, especially as funding and policy decisions are centralised. In practice, this means that even if Harare City Council identifies a pressing need to repair local roads, it is often at the mercy of national budgeting priorities and bureaucratic delays (Finn & Bandaiko, 2024).

The overlap of functions creates significant governance inefficiencies because responsibilities become blurred (Reinsberg, 2024). This results in conflicts of interest between national and local entities, each with its own set of priorities and objectives, which often do not align with the local realities faced by urban residents. Decision-making becomes more cumbersome when two or more levels of government are involved in the same issues, leading to conflicts, delays, and sometimes inconsistent policies. For example, while Harare City Council may want to focus on environmental sustainability through local waste management solutions, it is often constrained by national policies that prioritise cost-cutting measures or the interests of private contractors over local ecological needs.

4.5. Political and administrative implications of the overlap

Another critical dimension of this issue is the political dimension. The central government's control over urban functions has frequently been used as a political tool to exert influence over cities, especially those that are opposition strongholds, like Harare (Marumahoko & Yonatan, 2011). The interference in local governance through the transfer of critical services can be seen as a way of undermining the democratic autonomy of urban councils and limiting their ability to make decisions that reflect the will of local residents. The political clash between the local government (often opposition-led in cities like

Harare) and the central government results in a frozen or fragmented decision-making process, further complicating urban governance. The result is a stagnation in urban development, where citizens are left with subpar services and political instability in key urban areas.

4.6. Enhancing governance through multi-level collaboration

Despite concerns about bureaucratic delays, complexity in decision-making, and confusion over roles and responsibilities, differing priorities, political agendas, and administrative cultures leading to conflicts or inefficiencies, variations in resources and capacities between different levels of government creating imbalances, uncertainty over who is accountable for specific outcomes, leading to a lack of transparency and challenges in holding the right parties responsible for failures, higher levels of government imposing policies that do not align with local needs or contexts, leading to resistance and ineffective implementation and local authorities feeling constrained by national or provincial mandates, reducing their ability to respond flexibly to community-specific challenges, multi-level government collaboration can enhance governance and service delivery. The national government of Zimbabwe and HCC have worked together before on programs such as the prevention and mitigation of HIV and AIDS, Covid-19, drought, and cholera outbreak.

For example, the collaboration between the national and local governments in tackling the spread of HIV and AIDS has been a multifaceted effort involving various roles for both levels of government. The national government has been responsible for creating comprehensive policies and strategies to address HIV and AIDS. This includes formulating national guidelines and action plans that set the framework for prevention, treatment, and support (Ministry of Health and National Aids Council of Zimbabwe, 2022). It has also been responsible for securing funding from both domestic sources and international partners (such as the Global Fund) to support HIV/AIDS initiatives. It allocates resources to local councils to implement programs effectively. The national government also plays a crucial role in coordinating efforts across different sectors, including health, education, and social services. It ensures that various stakeholders, including NGOs and community organisations, align with national objectives. In addition, the national government often provides training and support to local authorities and health workers to enhance their capacity to deliver HIV prevention and treatment services. Lastly, the national government is responsible for establishing frameworks to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS programs, ensuring accountability and the ability to adapt strategies based on evidence.

For its part, the Harare City Council has been on the front lines of delivering HIV/AIDS services, including community outreach, testing, and counseling programs. It also implements the policies set forth by the national government at the local level. In addition, the city council plays a critical role in raising awareness about HIV/AIDS within communities (Harare City Council, 2024). It does this by engaging local populations through campaigns, education, and support groups, making information accessible and relevant. The city council also often mobilise additional resources from local businesses, NGOs, and community organisations to supplement national funding and enhance program delivery. The HCC is a crucial partner as it is better positioned to identify specific community needs related to HIV/AIDS, allowing it to tailor programs accordingly and provide targeted support. Lastly, the city through its health services department facilitates the provision of health services, including anti-retroviral therapy (ART), treatment adherence support, and care for affected families, ensuring that services are accessible to those in need. From the foregoing, it can be said that the synergy between the national and local governments in addressing HIV and AIDS has led to significant improvements in public health outcomes, increased access to treatment, and a greater understanding of the disease at the community level. This collaborative approach has fostered a comprehensive response that integrates prevention, care, and support services, ultimately contributing to the fight against the epidemic in Zimbabwe.

In the case study engaged on above, collaboration allowed for better alignment of policies and initiatives across different levels of government, leading to more coherent and effective governance, the different levels of government pooled resources, expertise, and funding, maximising efficiency and minimising duplication of efforts, collaboration with national government allowed for HCC to address specific community needs more effectively, ensuring that policies are relevant and tailored, multi-level collaboration facilitated knowledge transfer and capacity building, helping the local government (HCC) improve its operations and service delivery and engaging national government fostered innovation, as diverse perspectives and experiences were brought together to tackle complex issues and collaboration increased citizen engagement and trust in government, as local communities saw their needs represented at higher levels.

The foregoing aligns with the work of Agranoff (2003) who views government as a network of interconnected organisations, rather than a hierarchy. Agranoff (2003) underscores that no single level of government is solely responsible for policy outcomes and that relationships between different levels of government are not fixed, but rather are dynamic and ever-changing and stresses the importance of trust and collaboration in effectively coordinating action across different levels of government. To resolve the challenges posed by the overlap of functions, it is essential to redefine the roles of the central and local governments and to create clear lines of authority and responsibility. A more coordinated approach between national and local entities is needed to avoid duplication, streamline decision-making, and ensure that urban governance meets the needs of residents. Decentralisation must be more than just a policy on paper—it must be backed by empowered local authorities that have the necessary resources and decision-making powers to manage urban services effectively.

5. Conclusion

The article focused on the interaction between Zimbabwe's national government and Harare City Council (HCC), the local authority that is legally mandated to run the affairs of residents of the City of Harare. It sought to appreciate the dynamics characterising them by focusing on the concepts of multi-level government arrangement and cooperation. The Harare Metropolitan Council which HCC is a member was not engaged on as it is not yet in existence, although its necessity is underscored by the fact that it is specifically provided in Zimbabwe's Constitution that was adopted in 2013. In engaging on the interaction between the national government and HCC in the context of multi-level government system, the paper was guided by the theory of intergovernmental relations and document analysis. It also drew extensively from literature survey, strengthening its arguments and analysis by bringing in the insights on the subject from international researchers working in this vastly under researched area of study. Among others, the article focused on the power dynamics, overlapping functions, clash of values and the boundaries of the different levels of government being increasingly blurred in its engagement of the multi-level governmental system. It found, among others that unbalanced power dynamics characterised the multi-level system of government, that national government was not deterred from imposing itself on the local sphere, even though local government now enjoys constitutional protection. In unravelling some of the dynamics undermining the relationship between Zimbabwe's national government and HCC, the article explored a few examples to paint a picture of a multi-level governmental system that is not only complex but is also shaped by constant bickering and quarrelling, among others. Even then, it ends on a positive note by highlighting some of the positive results to come about as a result of multi-level governmental cooperation in policy areas such as mitigation of HIV and AIDS, disaster management and recently, Covid-19. Future studies may assess mechanisms for conflict resolution among different government levels and their effectiveness in promoting cooperation.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sylvester Marumahoko: Writing – original draft. **T. Norman Nhede:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Jephias Mapuva:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

No conflict of interest.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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