DECENTRALISATION IN ZIMBABWE: A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

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SUMMARY
Although decentralisation has been on the Government of Zimbabwe’s agenda since the early 1980s and there have been several structural reforms, little effective power has been decentralised. This article describes Zimbabwe’s various decentralisation efforts and effects including fiscal decentralisation, sectoral decentralisation, local political and institutional structures and local economic development and poverty reduction, and analyses their impact in Binga District, which is one of the poorest parts of the country. A number of conclusions are drawn from this experience. Firstly, decentralisation is part of a wider process of national political and economic change and cannot be planned independently; moreover, decentralisation for the ‘wrong’ reasons can be worse than no decentralisation at all and, if the political environment is not ‘right’, the problems of decentralisation can be exacerbated by external funding agencies. Secondly, decentralisation must be accompanied by capacity building, and the capacity of local institutions depends to a significant extent on the individuals involved. Thirdly, decentralisation must be seen as a ‘learning process’; consequently, despite the relatively little effective decentralisation to date, those involved have learnt valuable lessons. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION
Decentralisation has been high on the Government of Zimbabwe’s list of stated policy objectives throughout the 22 years since the country attained political independence, but its objectives and nature have changed over time (Wekwete and de Valk, 1990; Gasper, 1997; Makumbe, 1998; Government of Zimbabwe, 1999; Chakaipa, 2001). During the 1980s, the main objective was to coordinate and streamline the various agencies involved in sub-national development, and functions were decentralised to a hierarchy of provincial, district and local development committees composed of a combination of elected and appointed officials. Since the early 1990s, decentralisation has been seen as a means of promoting ‘democracy’ and ‘rationalising’ the public sector, and the focus of attention has turned from development committees to elected local authorities.

A common characteristic of both periods is the fact that, as is so often the case with decentralisation policies, there has been a major gap between rhetoric and reality. Relatively little effective power has actually been decentralised. Although the reasons for this are varied and complex, the basic obstacle has, as is so often the case, been the reluctance of national institutions to relinquish power. During the last 3 years, the situation has been complicated by the country’s deteriorating economic position and increasing political tension. The implementation of decentralisation plans has been further delayed, attempts have been made to decentralise functions without the financial resources necessary to execute them, and donor support for decentralised capital development and capacity-building programmes has been drastically reduced.

This article seeks to describe and explain the successes and failures of the Zimbabwean decentralisation experience. However, it does so not from a national perspective but from that of one of the country’s 55 rural districts. I have chosen this approach because I recently lived for 2 years in a relatively remote part of one of the country’s poorest and most isolated districts which gave me a unique opportunity to observe the impact of the country’s decentralisation efforts at the so-called ‘cutting edge’.

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The district on which this article focuses is Binga, one of the five districts of Matabeleland North Province. Located in northwestern Zimbabwe, bordering Zambia, it has an estimated population of just over 100,000 the vast majority of whom belong to the Tonga ethnic group. The district’s ecology and economy is dominated by the Zambezi River. Fifty years ago, most people lived near the river where they survived by cultivating in the fertile flood plain, fishing in the river and hunting wild game. With the construction of Kariba Dam in the late 1950s, many people were relocated to areas too dry for reliable cultivation and too far from the Lake to fish, and where crops and people are attacked by wild animals that can no longer be hunted. The Tonga are a minority ethnic group and are traditionally regarded by other groups, especially the majority Shona and Ndebele, as ‘backward’. However, in the June 2000 general election, the Binga people turned out in large numbers and voted overwhelmingly for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), so this attitude is changing. The Tonga are increasingly being recognised as important in the national political scene. This article examines the impact of the Government’s decentralisation policies on development efforts in Binga.

**FISCAL DECENTRALISATION**

Fiscal matters have proved to be a key stumbling block in Zimbabwe’s decentralisation efforts. The tendency has been to decentralise functions without adequate financial resources. For example, development planning was decentralised in the 1980s, but the allocation of development funds remained centralised. Consequently, the main impact of decentralisation was frustration at a sub-national level. Similarly, since the early 1990s, there has been considerable discussion about decentralising a number of central services to local authorities, and again a main obstacle has been failure to agree on how to finance them. Local authorities have insufficient own revenues and, because of the central government’s financial problems, it has been reluctant to give them additional revenue powers or to guarantee sufficient transfers to enable them to perform their functions.

There has been some recent fiscal decentralisation in Zimbabwe. The frustrations of earlier attempts to decentralise planning led to a number of efforts to provide funding for locally identified development projects. During the late 1990s, four sources of funding were made available to local authorities for this purpose:

- **District Development Grants (DDGs)** were provided to rural local authorities through the Ministry of Local Government, Public Construction and National Housing (hereafter MLG) as part of a donor-funded capacity-building programme.
- **A Rural Development Fund (RDF)** was established by the Ministry of Rural Resources and Water Development to support local infrastructure projects.
- **A Community Action Project (CAP)** was established under the auspices of the World Bank as part of the country’s ‘social dimensions of adjustment’ programme to provide funding for small, community-based projects in the poorest districts.
- **The second phase of an Urban Development Programme (Urban II)**, also funded by the World Bank and administered by MLG, provided funding to urban local authorities for infrastructure projects.

All of these funds have been suspended or terminated due to Zimbabwe’s current economic and political problems.

Binga Rural District Council (BRDC), the local authority responsible for Binga District, has had access to the first three of the above funds: DDGs, RDF and CAP. It has also had revenue from wildlife exploitation through Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE), which is discussed below. Access to these funds has had a significant impact on development planning and management at both district and local levels as it has enabled development projects to be identified and planned with the knowledge that funding will be available. It has for the first time been feasible for district and local institutions to analyse their development problems, prioritise needs and identify projects accordingly. The fact that the funds have been channelled through the district council has also increased the council’s status and forced it to address various planning and management problems.

However, the experience in Binga has also revealed a number of lessons regarding constraints on decentralised funding and conditions necessary for it to be effective. First, capacity to use funds has been seriously hampered by...
problems within the council, including lack of planning and management skills, as well as political and personal conflicts among councillors and officials and alleged abuses of power. On the positive side, the existence of decentralised funding helped to expose the problems within the council and to make the need to address them more urgent. Second, capacity to access funds at the community level has been constrained by similar capacity and abuse problems. Third, establishing in a short time period three funds with separate administrative procedures uncoordinated by the government or donors has created confusion at district and local levels and placed an unnecessary burden on the council. Fourth, project planning and implementation has been hampered by recent unfavourable macro-economic conditions. Finally, the untimely termination or suspension of most of the funding has left the council and communities in the lurch. Projects which had been planned are now unfunded and the ‘learning by doing’ process has come to an abrupt halt.

SECTORAL DECENTRALISATION

There has been a great deal of talk about sectoral decentralisation in Zimbabwe but very little actual decentralisation of meaningful powers has taken place. Despite attempts by the MLG, the little sectoral decentralisation that has occurred has been on a piecemeal basis and without adequate financial resources. The main sectors where there has been some decentralisation are primary education, rural water supplies, social welfare/poverty alleviation and wildlife management. There has also been prolonged discussion of decentralisation within the health sector but this has not occurred to date.

Primary education

Decentralisation of primary education has been undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) over a number of years. The first step was to establish School Development Committees (SDCs) to which functions would be devolved. The committees are composed of community members, with the head teacher and another staff member serving ex-officio. The SDCs have, over time, been given responsibility for construction and maintenance of school buildings, provision of equipment, determination and collection of a ‘development levy’ to meet maintenance and other costs not covered by the basic central grant, and, most recently, the hiring of teachers.

These measures have resulted in more community involvement and control over primary schools in Binga, but problems have arisen. First, SDC members were not well prepared for new responsibilities, so that the SDCs have tended to be ineffective and/or dominated by the head teacher. Second, most Binga communities are too poor to make significant financial contributions. Third, community interest and involvement are generally low, and people are reluctant to pay development levies and contribute time or labour. Fourth, there have been cases where the head teacher or other SDC members have abused their powers, particularly over recruitment of teachers and the control of money. Fifth, primary schools are officially council schools but MEC devolved most responsibilities to SDCs due to a lack of faith in councils. Consequently, the council does not enthusiastically support SDCs. Finally, MEC sometimes problematically intervenes in matters delegated to SDCs, such as recruitment of temporary teachers.

Given these issues, it is difficult to argue that decentralisation has benefitted Binga’s primary school system and it is easy to see why local people have mixed feelings about it.

Rural water supplies

Community-based maintenance of rural water supplies has been debated in Zimbabwe for years and there have been a number of related programmes. A pilot community-based system of maintenance through Water Point Committees was established with British funding in two of Binga’s 21 wards in the late 1990s. Until early 2000, maintenance was undertaken by the central District Development Fund (DDF), which employed ward pump-minders and provided support at district level. Facing a reduced 2000 budget, DDF decided that pump-minders would be self-employed and paid by local communities and that district councils would provide support. This decision was apparently unilateral and made without warning or preparation. Not surprisingly, rural water supplies have deteriorated. Some communities have met the challenge, organising themselves and collecting money for repairs from water users or using CAMPFIRE funds. NGOs assisted by explaining the problem to community-based staff and advising them what to do, but the council has so far failed to fill the gap at district level.
Poverty alleviation programmes

Binga’s experience of the recent decentralisation of poverty alleviation programmes has so far been confined to that of assisting parents who cannot afford to pay school fees or (in the case of primary schools, where there is no fee) development levies. Ten years ago, when the IMF/World Bank-supported structural adjustment programme was launched, a Social Fund administered by the Department of Social Welfare was established to provide, among other things, assistance with school fees and health charges. Funds became increasingly inadequate. Early in 2001, the Government decided to introduce a modified system in which local authorities, assisted by local officials of the ruling party and SDCs, would play the leading role. BRDC was suddenly informed that an amount of money was available for this purpose and required, in conjunction with MEC, to organise its distribution. The Council was given no resources for this exercise, so it had to mobilise support from other organisations, including NGOs. There also appears to be confusion over the eligibility criteria and application procedures.

A new ‘work for food’ programme has yet to be introduced in Binga, despite widespread recent reports of food shortages. However, indications from other districts suggest that problems are similar to the school fee assistance programme, if not worse.

Wildlife management

One of the earliest, most carefully planned and most publicised examples of sectoral decentralisation in Zimbabwe is CAMPFIRE (Mandondo, 2000; Conyers, 2002). In practice, CAMPFIRE focuses almost exclusively on wildlife management. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (DNPWM) conceived CAMPFIRE with conservation NGOs to reduce illegal hunting in communal areas bordering national parks and game reserves. With increasing animal populations in unfenced protected areas, large numbers of animals in adjacent communal lands have resulted in conflicts between people and animals.

Under CAMPFIRE, local authorities in areas with significant wildlife populations have been delegated ‘appropriate authority’ to manage wildlife under the Parks and Wildlife Act. This gives them the financially lucrative power to exploit the wildlife for commercial purposes, including lease of hunting concessions to commercial safari hunting companies. CAMPFIRE has been publicised, nationally and internationally, as a major success story. The general impression given is that it has resulted both in the reduction of illegal hunting (especially of elephants) and in significant benefits to local communities. In reality, however, the benefits have been much less, especially when seen from the perspective of local people.

Binga District has a substantial wildlife population and the council has had ‘appropriate authority’ to manage this wildlife for nearly 10 years. During this time, CAMPFIRE has become a household word in the district. Each of the 21 wards receives some CAMPFIRE money and each has a CAMPFIRE committee which looks after the money and, in consultation with the community as a whole, decides how to use it. CAMPFIRE has had positive achievements. In particular, it has provided substantial funding for community based projects and CAMPFIRE funds have improved the Council’s financial position, enhanced its status vis-à-vis other district institutions and provided experience in decentralised fund management. Access to CAMPFIRE funds at the community level has also provided valuable experience in project planning and implementation and validated local institutions. Finally, there has been a significant increase in awareness of wildlife conservation and management.

However, there have also been major shortcomings (Conyers, 2002). First, neither the council nor local communities have effective control over wildlife management since programme conditions imposed by the DNPWM are rigid and leave little room for manoeuvre. Second, the revenue CAMPFIRE generates, although substantial, is insufficient even to compensate people for wildlife-damaged crops, let alone to support them on a regular basis. Third, there is no evidence of a significant decrease in illegal hunting under CAMPFIRE. Fourth, the council fails to effectively protect people from wildlife damage, which has serious repercussions in terms of the council’s public image. This problem is exacerbated because the council has often failed to distribute the required 50% of CAMPFIRE revenue to communities, due partly to high administration costs and the use of CAMPFIRE revenue for other

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1 Given the timing of this move, it was (rightly or wrongly) seen by many people as a political tactic to win support for the ruling party in the 2001 presidential elections.
activities. Finally, despite substantial donor-funded training and support, there have been many cases, at both district and local level, where CAMPFIRE funds have been both unintentionally and deliberately misused, causing conflict and disruption of activities. Many of these problems can be resolved with time, as those involved learn from experience. However, there will remain an apparently insurmountable conflict between wildlife conservation and the livelihoods of local people. Since CAMPFIRE has failed to replace agriculture as the main livelihood, most people continue to destroy wildlife to protect themselves and their crops or to use as a supplementary source of food or income.

In summary, Binga’s experience suggests that Zimbabwe’s recent attempts at sectoral decentralisation have generally been disappointing. Even the more successful CAMPFIRE programme for wildlife management has been plagued by many problems. Most of these efforts were initiated for the ‘wrong’ reasons, poorly planned and underfunded. Consequently, there has been little improvement in service provision or local empowerment. It should be noted, however, that service provision has deteriorated at all levels in the last few years due to the deteriorating national economic situation. This crisis has encouraged central agencies to decentralise some services in an unplanned manner and without adequate funding, i.e. to ‘pass the buck’ to local authorities.

LOCAL POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

Zimbabwe’s decentralisation efforts have involved a number of different levels and types of institution. Table 1 lists some of the main institutions to which functions have been devolved, subdivided by level, and indicates the membership of each.

The relative importance of these institutions has varied over time. For example, the provinces played a major role in the 1980s but have declined since then. At the district level, development committees were more important than councils in the 1980s, but since the early 1990s, councils are the most important district institution. New ward and village councils reflect an attempt to revive and strengthen the role of ‘traditional’ leaders. CAMPFIRE committees, SDCs and water point committees were created at various points to serve specific purposes. There are some spatial variations. In some districts, for example, CAMPFIRE committees do not exist or have been combined with Ward and Village Development Committees. In some areas NGOs or area-based development programmes have established institutional networks.

All of the institutions listed in Table 1 exist in Binga, at least on paper. Furthermore, a number of local NGOs have established their own institutional structures, such as committees at the ward level. The most important of these NGOs are:

- Binga Development Association (BIDA): a membership organisation that established committees in the district, usually at ward level, during the early 1990s.

<p>| Table 1. Institutions to which powers decentralised |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Level</strong></th>
<th><strong>Institutions</strong></th>
<th><strong>Membership</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Province</td>
<td>Provincial Council</td>
<td>Elected and appointed leaders</td>
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<td>Provincial Development Committee</td>
<td>Appointed leaders/officials</td>
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<td>District</td>
<td>Rural District Council</td>
<td>Elected leaders</td>
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<td>Rural District Development Committee</td>
<td>Elected leaders/officials</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ward</td>
<td>Ward Council</td>
<td>Traditional leaders</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ward Development Committee</td>
<td>Elected and appointed leaders</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ward CAMPFIRE Committee</td>
<td>Elected representatives</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Village Council</td>
<td>Traditional leaders</td>
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<td>Village/service point</td>
<td>Village Development Committee</td>
<td>Elected and appointed leaders</td>
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<td>Village CAMPFIRE Committee</td>
<td>Elected representatives</td>
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<td></td>
<td>School Development Committee</td>
<td>Elected users/officials</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Water Point Committee</td>
<td>Elected users</td>
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Binga Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP): a church-based human rights organisation which was established in 1996 and has committees and community-based advisers in most wards.

Kulima Mbobumi Training Centre (KMTC): an agricultural training centre based in Binga, which was established in the early 1990s and has ward level committees, which assist in the selection and subsequent support of trainees.

A number of general observations may be made about the effectiveness of these various institutions and their actual and potential roles in decentralisation. First, BRDC has considerable potential as a decentralised development agency, but a number of problems have hampered its performance. Many of these are ‘capacity’ problems which should be resolvable with external support. However, recent capacity-building efforts have so far failed to have any significant effect, due primarily to personal interest-based conflicts between the key actors. Conflicts have been fuelled by local and national political divisions and access to decentralised resources such as CAMPFIRE revenue. Zimbabwe’s current national political and economic situation has also exacerbated the council’s financial problems and has led to the withdrawal of most capacity-building support, as well as intensified local political conflicts.

Second, the rural district development committee (a coordinating committee, composed of all government agency heads, chairpersons of council committees and representatives of NGOs operating in the district) is relatively weak and ineffective. This is partly because decentralisation and capacity-building efforts at district level have focused on councils rather than development committees since the early 1990s, but there is also a long history of tension between the council and government agencies, primarily for ethnic reasons. The council and other Tonga-based institutions tend to regard central agencies as representatives of ‘outside’ forces that have played an increasingly dominant role in the district’s economy at the expense of indigenous Tonga. In addition, the capacity of government agencies has always been relatively low since Binga’s isolation and underdevelopment make it difficult to attract and retain staff.

Third, at the ward level, the most obvious problem is that there are too many institutions. This causes confusion amongst the general population which does not understand the differences between them. It also puts pressure on the few individuals who are sufficiently politically ambitious or socially conscious to play an active role since they end up on multiple committees.

The effectiveness of institutions at the ward and local levels seems to depend on a few factors, probably in increasing order of importance:

- **The length of time the institution has been in existence.** The ward and village development committees, which were established in 1984 and given functions previously under traditional leaders, at first caused considerable confusion and resentment. Over the years, people came to accept them and learnt to distinguish between their roles and those of traditional leaders. Introducing ward and village councils has once again caused confusion, because, although they include traditional leaders, they are new and increase the complexity of the local administrative system.

- **The capacity and commitment of the organisation responsible for their establishment and support.** CAMPFIRE committees, for example, are generally more effective than ward and village development committees, substantially because they have received more guidance and support. Similarly, CCJP committees are currently more active and effective than BIDA or KMTC committees, because CCJP is relatively well organised while BIDA and KMTC both have serious administrative problems.

- **The relevance of the institution’s functions to the local community.** For example, CAMPFIRE committees tend to be more effective than general-purpose development committees not only because of the support they receive but also because they deal with more specific issues of immediate relevance to community members.

- **The quality of the individuals involved.** Variations in performance between individual institutions within a particular category are probably as great as, if not greater than, those between categories. Thus, for example, there are ‘good’ councillors and ‘bad’ councillors, effective CAMPFIRE and CCJP committees and ineffective ones, etc. The reason is that individuals involved vary in terms of organisational and leadership capacities, energy levels and, most importantly, objectives, ambitions and integrity.
Finally, it should be emphasised that all institutions have been seriously affected by current national economic and political problems. In addition to the obviously negative effects already identified, a number of effects appear positive but are of little real benefit. The most obvious example is that communities are being forced to become more self-reliant. For instance, water point committees have had to assume more responsibilities but members have to invest more time and money to maintain existing service levels so that self-reliance is a means of survival rather than development. There are, however, genuinely positive benefits. Most important, local institutions and the population in general, are becoming increasingly aware of their political rights and responsibilities. Most people in Binga District now realise the impact of politics on their personal lives and, therefore, the importance of electing responsible leaders and ensuring that they perform. Such awareness is essential for creating effective local democratic institutions.

LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY REDUCTION

Local economic development and poverty reduction have not been specifically stated as objectives of decentralisation in Zimbabwe. Decentralisation has been regarded as a means to promote rural development, primarily through improved service delivery with little consideration of the implications for development and poverty. Assessing the impact of decentralisation is hampered because relatively little has occurred to date and there are many other factors involved. All we can do here, therefore, is to identify key factors that may influence economic development and poverty in Binga and consider how much control local institutions have, or could have, over them.

Natural resource base

Binga’s natural resource base provides considerable potential for local economic development, but it is difficult to target it to benefit local people. This is partly because the activities with greatest potential, such as commercial fishing and tourism, require capital, entrepreneurship and technical skills, and thus tend to be dominated by ‘outsider’ Zimbabweans (both white and black) from other parts of the country. Most indigenous Tonga people remain dependent on small-scale agriculture for which the natural resource base is (due to low and erratic rainfall, poor soils and predatory wild animals) not really suited. Attempts to target development at the local population are also hampered by lack of local control. For example, large parts of the district, including some of the best agricultural areas, are designated as national parks, safari areas and forest reserves, which are managed by central agencies and are not accessible to the local population. The only real powers administered locally are related to land allocation within parts of the district designated as communal and general state land. These powers do enable the council to have some control over the location and form of development, to give priority to enterprises that benefit local people and to raise some additional revenue.

Human resources

One reason why the majority of the Binga population fails to benefit from the district’s natural resource potential is that they lack entrepreneurial and technical skills. This can be attributed to the district’s isolation, the poor quality of education and stigmatisation of the Tonga by other ethnic groups. Most of these factors are beyond the control of local institutions. The area’s isolation, for example, is due to its location and the poor inter-area roads which are a central responsibility. The main education problem is the lack of secondary and technical facilities, also a central responsibility. There is scope for local initiative through vocational training, entrepreneurial development programmes and efforts to make people aware of their own self-worth. Some progress is being made in these areas, mainly by local NGOs, but lack of initiative and funding remain a constraint.

Infrastructure and services

Inadequate infrastructure and services affect the levels of economic development and poverty in Binga in many ways. For example, the lack of good road communication with other parts of the country hampers development of tourism, the export of local produce and the procurement of inputs for local industries and consumer goods. Poor road communication within the district hampers movement of produce, consumer goods and people.
inadequate quantity and quality of educational facilities, primary health facilities, electricity and banking facilities, among others, also constrain development and general wellbeing. Most of these factors are currently beyond the direct control of local institutions because they lack either authority or financial resources. There is a need for local institutions to have access to discretionary funding, either through increased revenue powers or through provision of decentralised funding for capital development, such as the DDGs, RDF and CAP mechanisms discussed above.

**Macro-economic environment**

Macro-economic policies and problems are a major determinant of economic development and poverty in Binga. Economic activity is affected by factors such as inflation, interest rates, access to foreign currency, wage rates and labour policies, and the availability of basic inputs, while poverty is affected by employment levels, wage rates, inflation and availability of basic goods and services. All of these factors are beyond the control of local institutions. The impact of current problems is so great that it almost certainly outweighs benefits of attempts to stimulate economic activity or reduce poverty. In major urban areas, many people have responded to the decline in formal sector activity and increase in poverty by engaging in informal sector activities, for which there is more scope for local initiative. However, in a rural area like Binga, opportunities for informal sector activity are limited and the income people can earn from them is small.

The level of poverty can, of course, be reduced by welfare policies. As noted above, the introduction of structural adjustment reforms was accompanied by measures to alleviate the impact of such policies on ‘vulnerable’ sectors of the population. However, these measures were largely ineffective, initially because of their administrative impracticality and inadequate funding. Furthermore, like other macro-economic policies, they have been beyond the control of local institutions. Recently, some attempts have been made to resuscitate these measures and, as noted above, to decentralise some aspects of their operation to local authorities. However, as already indicated, it seems likely that they will be equally ineffective due to lack of proper planning and inadequate funding.

**HIV/AIDS**

A detailed discussion of the HIV/AIDS situation in Binga is obviously beyond the scope of this article, but it clearly affects local economic development and poverty. Binga’s relative isolation has failed to protect it from the ravages of the disease as there is considerable movement of people in and out of the district. Furthermore, traditional customs and attitudes (including polygamy, taboos on discussing matters related to sex, and misconceptions about causes of the disease) have encouraged its spread. There is scope for decentralised measures to combat HIV/AIDS including preventive education and victim support programmes and some attempts have been made to tackle the problem in Binga. For example, the district has an AIDS committee and an international NGO is currently supporting an AIDS awareness programme. These efforts could no doubt be increased if funding were available but such local initiatives require support from a more concerted national effort than what currently exists in Zimbabwe.

**Political situation**

The political environment is at present probably the single most important factor affecting economic development and poverty in Binga. The tense situation at present has had both direct effects on local economic development (e.g. the reduction in tourist arrivals and the intimidation and/or closure of local service institutions) and indirect effects (such as the withdrawal of external assistance and loss of investor confidence). However, even in more ‘normal’ times, the national political situation has a major impact, especially indirectly through its effects on macro-economic conditions.

The local political situation, however, also has a significant effect on local economic development. For example, the political problems in BRDC mentioned above have seriously hampered its ability to perform its limited but important functions, such as infrastructure provision. Although these problems have been fuelled by the current national political conflicts, they stem from longstanding personal power struggles within the district. Similar problems, albeit on a smaller scale, exist at the ward and community levels where they hamper the effectiveness of
local development committees, CAMPFIRE committees and other such institutions, all of which play a small but important local development role.

Clearly, the factors affecting local economic development and poverty reduction in Binga are varied, complex and interrelated. Although some of them are subject to local control or influence, the most important ones, such as the natural resource base, AIDS, the macro-economic environment and the national political situation, are ones over which there is very little scope for effective local control.

CONCLUSIONS

A number of general conclusions about the process of decentralisation can be drawn from this brief account of the impact of Zimbabwe’s decentralisation efforts on Binga District. First, decentralisation should ideally be carefully designed and planned; in practice, however, it seldom is as it is a political process which is introduced as and when it is politically expedient to do so and in the form that suits political objectives. In Zimbabwe, for example, despite years of preparation for a coordinated decentralisation effort, the few cases where functions have been decentralised have been merely ad hoc responses to national crises or departmental priorities. This raises a fundamental question for those involved in the design and critique of decentralisation: what can be done to ensure that at least some of the substantial existing knowledge about decentralisation is reflected in policy initiatives?

Second, decentralisation is advocated as a means of achieving ‘desirable’ objectives, such as improved service delivery and local empowerment, not as a strategy for achieving dubious ends, such as ‘passing the buck’ or increasing political control—or, for that matter, as an end in itself. Decentralisation efforts should be judged accordingly. Decentralisation that is introduced for the ‘wrong’ reasons or is poorly designed or inadequately planned, such as some initiatives in Zimbabwe, is unlikely to achieve the ‘desirable’ objectives and can, in fact, be worse than no decentralisation at all.

Third, the macro-level environment, both economic and political, has a major impact on the extent to which decentralisation achieves intended objectives. The negative effects of the current political tension and economic decline in Zimbabwe tend to outweigh or override the potential benefits of decentralisation. In such an environment, decentralisation is often, as the experience with rural water supply maintenance in Binga suggests, merely a means of enabling people to survive, not a strategy for ‘development’.

Fourth, the performance of local institutions, and therefore the effectiveness of functions decentralised to them, depends to a large extent on the capacity and, in particular, the attitudes, ambitions and integrity of the individuals involved. BRDC is an obvious example. The importance of this ‘human factor’ is frequently overlooked in the formulation of decentralisation policies.

Fifth, decentralisation must be accompanied by efforts to develop the capacity of local institutions. However, because of the many different factors that affect capacity (and in particular the impact of the ‘human factor’), capacity building is an extremely long, slow and frustrating process (Government of Zimbabwe, 1998). The problems that persist in Binga, despite major donor-funded capacity-building programmes, illustrate this point.

Sixth, although decentralisation can, if planned and implemented properly, achieve a wide variety of objectives, it is not a panacea and the type of decentralisation which is required to achieve one objective may not be appropriate to achieve others. For example, the type of decentralisation under discussion in Zimbabwe (and in most African countries) is unlikely to have a major impact on local economic development. Similarly, the type of decentralisation over wildlife management which people in Binga would like to have is inconsistent with national and international conservation policy.

Seventh, because of the inevitably political nature of the environment in which decentralisation occurs and in which external funding agencies operate, the latter can be part of the problem of decentralisation as well as part of the solution. The problems created in Binga by, initially, the lack of coordination between the various externally supported decentralised funding programmes and, subsequently, their premature withdrawal in the present contentious political environment, illustrates this point.

Finally, and to conclude on a more positive note, it must be emphasised that the many problems which surround the planning and implementation of decentralisation reforms should be regarded not as signs of failure, but as an
inevitable part of the ‘learning process’ which is inherent in any development initiative. This learning process will always, sooner or later, yield some positive benefits. At times like this, it is difficult to see any such benefits in Zimbabwe; however, the undoubted increase in political awareness among ordinary people in Binga over the last 2 years is, in fact, a positive example—and a very important one.

REFERENCES


