

Corruption in Urban Councils and its Impact on Service Delivery

Tapiwa Mupandanyama

Independent Researcher, Harare, Zimbabwe

Kudakwashe Mahlangu

PAU Institute for Governance, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Yaounde II
Soa, Cameroon

Abstract

Corruption is recognized as one of the utmost challenges affecting urban councils in Zimbabwe. The dominance of corruption in urban councils has largely contributed to the failure of several urban local authorities to provide services effectively and efficiently. A closer look at the state of service delivery in most urban councils in Zimbabwe discloses that corruption is one of the depravities of transparency and accountability. Corruption has largely contributed to poor service delivery in urban councils. Uncollected garbage, potholed roads, congestion, unavailability of potable water as well as mushrooming of illegal settlements is clear evidence of limited accountability and transparency mechanisms in urban councils. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the dimension of corruption and how it has impacted on service delivery in urban councils. The paper offers answers to deal with corruption as a way of improving service delivery. The paper is acquainted by a wide evidently base which incorporates information acquired through interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observation, and secondary research of sampled urban councils.

Key words: urban councils, corruption, service delivery, transparency, accountability

Introduction

Corruption in urban councils is a worrying phenomenon that has calamitous implications on service delivery. In Zimbabwe, urban councils are perceived as the epitome of service delivery as a result of their constitutional mandate. Therefore, corrupt activities rampant in urban councils have attracted much attention of various stakeholders including government, media and anti-corruption bodies to look into issues of transparency and accountability in urban councils. It is therefore the main intention of this paper to examine the dimensions of corruption in Zimbabwe's urban councils and how it has impacted on service delivery. Irrespective of the numerous development initiatives of urban councils, not much has been realized in terms of service delivery. Given the huge amount of revenue collected for service delivery and the one disbursed through devolution funds, it can be argued that much could have been archived in as much as service delivery in urban councils is concerned.

Conceptualizing Corruption

Defining corruption has proved to be problematic since it is multi-dimensional. Corruption is not a confined phenomenon since it cut across all cultural, social and economic boundaries (Kanyane, 2014). Politically, corruption include influence peddling, non-disclosure and vote rigging. Economically, corruption forms include bribery, extortion, money laundering and tender-preneurism. Socially, it includes behaviours such as gift taking, nepotism, sexual harassment and cronyism. Technologically, corruption includes computer scams and hacking. World Bank (2016) explains corruption as the misuse of public office for personal gain. Bale (2019) emphasized that corruption is the abuse of power as a result of contemplations of personal gain, which is not only monetary. According to Bannarjee (1996) corruption comes in form of fraud, bribes inflating of government tenders, ghosting, inflating allowances, misleading tender boards, forging documents, obtaining money by false pretenses, illegal sale of land, embezzlements of trust funds, misappropriation of money, money laundering and unnecessary travel and subsistence claims. As postulated by Kanyane (2015), corruption is defined:

As the use of public office for private gain, or in other words, use of official position, rank, or status by an office bearer for his own personal benefit. Following from this definition, examples of corrupt behaviour would include: (a) bribery, (b) extortion, (c) fraud, (d) embezzlement, (e)

nepotism, (f) cronyism, (g) appropriation of public assets and property for private use, and (h) influence peddling.

Geurus and Garofalo (2005) argue that corruption means the abuse of authority bequeathed in an office for private gain including sabotage of public interest by personal interest. In the context of this paper, corruption denotes dishonesty in managing financial resources in urban local authorities by management staff, Non-Executive Directors and other workers. In addition, Larche (1999) summaries that corruption is a sensitive issue in local authorities. There are many explanations of corruption. In short, corruption involves the act of breaking the law. To buttress this view, Pope (1996) also claimed that corruption is a behaviour on the part of public officials whether politicians in which they unlawfully enrich themselves or those close to them by abusing the public power entrusted to them. According to Bayley (2005) corruption is the abuse of power as a result of considerations of private gain, which need not to be only financial. This definition by Bayley (2005) is broader as it appreciates and accommodates both the non-monetary and monetary consequences of corruption. Corruption can be classified into two categories namely grand or petty. Firstly, grand which can also be referred to as high level corruption involves significant amount of money and high level officials. Secondly, petty corruption involves smaller amounts and is usually perpetrated by junior officials. Corruption is an indication of poor governance and has far reaching implications to the political, social, and economic affairs of societies. Corruption is counterproductive to effective and efficient service delivery. Corruption eat away the tax collected from the public (Kanyane, 2010). Corrupt tendencies result in provision of essential services, thereby refuting communities their rights to a better life. It is on this foundation that corruption in urban councils weakens prospects for local economic development as reliable investors eschew urban councils that are riddled with corrupt scandals. Among other implications, corruption perpetuate and generate distributional inequality (Ubi *et al* 2012). It impoverishes the majority in the same manner of enriching the minority, as such the gap between the rich and the poor widens. It is therefore, on this basis that corruption is infectious and therefore, is an opponent of development. While urban local authorities have no hope of eliminating corruption, they can should however take steps to prevent corruption.

Dimensions of Corruption in Urban Councils and its Impact on Service Delivery

The dimension of corruption in Zimbabwe's urban councils differ especially with the way in which financial resources are embezzled. This is attributed to a failure to provide a solid legal framework for good governance in urban councils, organizational deficiencies and human nature. It should be well known that urban councils are managed by human beings who are by their nature egocentric and are continuously inspired by the craving to survival above everyone else, hence, they become selfish. Local governance research has shown that councils are now interest driven with the ultimate aim of survival of the people managing them. Urban councils in Zimbabwe are established through the Urban Councils Act to address development needs of areas in which they are established.

Consequently, there is now manipulation of development work by urban councils in an attempt to access a large allocation of devolution funds as well as the collection of huge rates from residents. Urban councils now seem to be more individualistic and not concerned with service delivery. Participatory observation exposed that in many instances, people want to be employed by urban councils based on the top agenda issues of the moment, with the main objective of getting hefty salaries and their desire to access resources which they misuse for their personal gain. This situation explains why the state of service delivery in most urban councils is poor as witnessed by uncollected garbage, busting sewer pipes, no running water and selling of wetlands for residential and commercial purposes. Corruption in urban councils has weakened the effective and efficient delivery of services.

It is important to reference some of the researches conducted by various local governance scholars on corruption and service delivery. Local governance researchers identified and concur with the following dimensions of corruption in urban councils.

1. Sextortion and sexual abuse of women to gain favors.
2. Inflating prices and flouting procurement regulations.
3. Patronage - only those belonging to certain political party benefiting from services
4. Influence peddling

While urban councils are creatures of statutes, they are closely monitored by the Ministry of Local Government. Research has shown that urban councils allow the Ministry to see only what they want them to see. An anonymous source who works for an unnamed urban local authority described how they would rush preparing for the Ministry's monitoring visit, invite

only those officials whom they know would not expose the government funded projects that were not properly implemented and cook reports with fabricated information. The research exposed that even though urban councils are audited, the process is sometimes manipulated to expose the desirable results. Participatory observation in one urban council exposed that records and financial books are manipulated to suit the requirements of the audit. This clearly shows that the enthusiasm to engage in corruption by urban council officials has weakened the effective delivery of services as evidenced by poor services being delivered in the majority of the urban suburbs in Harare, Gweru, Bulawayo only to mention but a few.

In their very nature, urban councils are non-profit making entities, but the lifestyles of their employees give a different impression, especially the Executive and Non-Executive Directors. Research has revealed that top management in urban councils send their children to luxurious private schools, and they own properties in expensive low-density areas. The mismanagement of funds in urban councils is disturbing yet they masquerade as development entities. Participant observation has discovered that both Executive and Non-Executive Directors in some instances claim huge travelling and subsistence allowances for work they will never do and no one even account for the funds. In actuality, those answerable for budgetary issues usually abuse of funds. This is because the whole organization's employees will be profiting from the abuse of funds as they usually work as a team. The consequences of such corrupt activities eliminate the principles of transparency and accountability in urban council as evidenced by abuse of funds that is meant for service delivery for personal gain. The failure to uphold the principles of transparency and accountability as a result of corruption ultimately result in urban councils' failure to collect garbage, maintain bursting sewer pipes, rehabilitate potholed roads and to provide potable water. Apart from claiming huge travelling allowances, in some circumstances trips are unreasonably planned for the purpose of exhausting petty cash. In so doing, management in urban councils will be wasting resources that could be used for service delivery for their egoistic benefits. This is predominant even in rural councils.

Moreover, the presence of ghost employees in urban councils' payrolls has been a method used by management to extort financial resources. This is predominant in towns and municipalities whose accountability to their stakeholders is not comprehensive as they are not usually subjected to vigorous auditing. It is important to highlight that management in urban councils is reluctant to promote transparency and accountability initiatives. For example, top management is reluctant to provide resources to the internal audit department which also further compromises its objectivity of fighting corruption. By having a list of ghost employees,

these organizations develop payrolls that accommodate such non-existent employees whose salaries will be directed towards the bank accounts of the management. This short-changes resources that could be used in service delivery to achieve sustainable development in urban areas. While such practices are hard to disinter, participant observation has exposed these maleficent practices that have negatively obstructed on service delivery.

More so, the partisan recruitment of urban council employees is evidence of massive corruption in urban councils that has negatively affected the efficient delivery of services. As a way of rewarding supporters who had campaigned for them during elections, councilors at many instances recruit employees from their wards. This affect the urban councils because it ends up having unbudgeted people in the organization. This hiring procedure has made it difficult for urban local authorities to provide services efficiently and effectively. Participant observation has discovered that as a result of corruption, urban councils are not prepared to be ethical in their recruitment processes. In one of the sampled urban local authority, it was highlighted that junior staff who are recruited through the process of nepotism are deployed in critical departments like housing and finance leading to chaos in such departments since they don't possess the required expertise for such posts. An example for the sampled urban council revealed that 50 junior police officers were recruited soon after the 2008 elections. This circumstance is buttressed by Mutema (2016) who said that the hiring of the low level workers is prone to partisanship as councilors manipulate the organization to employ their relatives and political supporters. He also argued that staff engaged through this system are problematic to control because of political links. In strengthening this view, Mabika (2018) also emphasized that this hiring process riddled with corruption has made it problematic for urban local authorities to adopt the practices of transparency and accountability.

Solutions to Corruption in Urban Councils

Much needs to be done to reduce corruption in a bid to promote effective and efficient service delivery in urban councils. While it may be gallant to eliminate the evil, it is difficult to wholly eliminate it. Nevertheless, measures can be laid in place to decrease the level of corruption so as to promote the principles of accountability and transparency which ultimately lead to the success of service delivery.

First, the Ministry of Local Government should provide transparency and accountability mechanisms for monitoring corruption in urban councils. The Ministry should come up with mechanisms that stimulate the accountability of urban councils like appointing

external auditor to frequently check on the financial books of urban councils. Likewise, the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission should with immediate effect audit the management and other workers in urban councils. Section 13 (a) of the Anti-Corruption Commission Act, the institution is delegated among other duties '*to monitor and examine the practices, systems, and procurement procedures of public and private institutions*'. Therefore, it falls within the ambit of the duties of ZACC to probe urban councils for corruption. Shockingly, corruption is going unchecked in urban councils as the anti-corruption body is mainly preoccupied with political witch hunting exercises. Furthermore, punishment tools that emphasise on restorative justice including ensuring that the looted resources are reimbursed, for example, attaching and auctioning assets of offenders could go a long way in limiting corruption in urban councils. Even though this is hard to execute, such transparency and accountability mechanisms are essential in dropping corruption in public institutions particularly urban councils.

Additionally, non-partisan recruitment and selection should be strengthened by emphasis on trust and corporation in the relationship between Executive and Non-Executive Directors in urban councils. The degree of politicisation in recruitment and selection of staff where politicians interfere in administrative affairs of councils should be eliminated. The interdependency of the Executive Directors should be guaranteed free from political manipulations. The executive should be autonomous in policy implementation, hiring and promotion of staff, for example, minimising political patronage appointments and offering employment based on political connections.

To add, respondents from the sampled urban council emphasised that regular and competitive payment of salaries must be implemented to eradicate corruption. Urban councils need to pay competitive market based salaries. The reward system of urban councils must provide for the basic needs of their workers. One of the respondents pointed out that low remuneration entices the need in workers to increase their salaries through engaging in corrupt practices as incentives. In this regard, urban councils should consequently, put much effort towards refining the local economy through local economic development strategies in a bit to improve their revenue base.

Moreover, both elected and appointed officials should declare their assets before being appointed into office within the stipulated period of being appointed or sworn into office. These officials must declare the funds and assets they own and firms in which they are major shareholder. Asset disclosure laws should be passed and enforced. Although it can face some resistance from the political elite, the Ministry responsible for Local Government should properly monitor and supervise the declaration of assets.

Likewise, socialization through ethics trainings is a critical component to curb corruption in urban councils. Local governance research reveals that there are insufficient ethics training initiatives in urban councils. Ethics training is a valued approach for stimulating corruption prevention. As earlier deliberated, ethics training is a vibrant constituent to raise ethics awareness and to build up skills capable of getting rid of corruption. Ethics training is necessary for organisations that are taking a virtuous therapeutic path to thwart the problem of corruption. Ethics training forms the person's inmost ethical fabric which is uncovered in good character. Urban councils should accord ethics training uppermost precedence by providing a budget for ethics training program. Ethics training should not be a once-off event, but a continuing activity. Ethics training should be part of the orientation program whereby newly hired workers in urban local councils are made conscious of the organisational rules of ethical behaviour. Apart from newly employed council employees, ethics training initiatives should target Non-Executive officials, shop floor employees, municipal police officers, middle and senior management officers, housing and finance department personnel, members who constitute the procurement committee among others. Urban councils should come up with ethics training initiatives that equip employees in the organisational with ethical value system.

Socialisation through the formal education system is a critical element in ending corruption in urban councils. Tertiary institutions should raise graduates who are fine tuned to behave ethically and with uprightness. The formal education system should focus, among other objectives, on personality building. Moral education should, therefore, be made compulsory in all tertiary schools. The values of ubuntu or unhu which form part of the Zimbabwean national value system must also be indoctrinated during the developmental stages of education and this should be incorporated in the education curriculum. Moral building should be a vital constituent of university and college education. As much as Zimbabwean tertiary institutions are aiming to produce entrepreneurial and gender sensitive graduates, they should also direct shift to producing graduates who are ethically and morally upright. The Ministry in charge of the Higher and Tertiary Education needs to embrace a policy that involves ethics modules to be made compulsory for all students who pass through the institutions of higher learning.

It can also be added that blacklisting of individuals and companies that involve themselves in supply chain corruption is a therapy that can be adopted to wipe out corruption in urban councils. Given the omnipresence of supply chain corruption in most urban councils, respondents from the sampled urban councils maintained that there must be regulations in place which bans people and companies found guilty of engaging in corruption. The legislation must punish contractors who commit offenses linking to supply chain corruption. Banning or

blacklisting can act as a preventive mechanism to individuals and companies who have a feeling to practise supply chain corruption urban councils. This argument is also buttressed with the view of Atkinson (2021) who revealed that supply chain corruption need to be stopped through blacklisting of individuals and companies that engage in such acts of corruption. To add, the procurement process must provide for penalties who disregard procurement regulations. The procurement process should be guided by a legal framework that should ensure the transparent awarding of tenders.

Legal protection of whistle blowers is a mechanism that can be used to promote accountability and transparency in urban councils. Urban local authorities should come up with legislation that protects whistle blowers. In this regard, the legislation should protect employees who notify against wrong doing. Whistle blower legislation should be worker oriented.

Conclusion

In the closing examination, the paper concludes that corruption is widespread in urban councils in Zimbabwe. The delinquent of corruption is prevalent in urban councils whose transparency and accountability mechanisms are soiled by permissiveness on the part of urban council management and insufficient monitoring by the responsible Ministry. The most dominant dimension of corruption in urban councils is related to misappropriation. Other dimensions of corruption predominant in urban councils includes distorting budgets, patronage and inflating prices. It is in this regard that the paper gave an examination of corruption and its impact on service delivery in urban councils. Dimensions as well as the solutions of corruption have been explained in detail.

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