

## **RURAL COMMUNITIES AND POLICY PARTICIPATION: THE CASE OF ECONOMIC POLICIES IN ZIMBABWE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Rural communities of Zimbabwe have long been marginalised as evidenced by a large development gap between them and urban communities. The idea of linking lack of development in rural areas with participation in policy making process is vital for many policy makers. This research focused on assessing the roles played by rural people of Zimbabwe in crafting and implementing economic policies. The research went further to investigate why rural communities showed little understanding of economic policies and whether it is important to engage the citizen in crafting and implementing public policies. The study was carried out in rural Binga and Chivi districts. The research illustrated that rural people had little understanding of economic policies. The paper concludes that supporting democracy, strengthening economic competitiveness and meeting local state and global challenges requires the reimagining of the role of the citizen in 21<sup>st</sup> century public policies. Participation should be an important pillar of such reimagining.*

**KEY TERMS:** Policy, rural participation, policy formulation, inclusive development.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A public policy refers to how the government addresses or doesn't address issues that affect the public and this could be through regulation, legislation, funding priorities or other actions (Hayes, 2001). In simpler terms, this can be said to be what the government does. Hayes defined a public policy as a purposive and consistent course of action produced as a response to a perceived problem of a constituency, formulated by a specific political process, and adopted, implemented, and enforced by a public agency.

The political independence of 1980 came with promises, hopes and expectations to Zimbabweans. The chance given to the populace to vote was a good step towards democratization especially after about a century of segregation and voters discrimination based on race. It's quite agreeable that casting of votes is a principal pillar of democracy but it's incontestable that voting must work hand in glove with civilian participation in economic policy formulation and implementation. This paper sought to give a picture of the level of public

participation in economic policy formulation and implementation giving a greater attention to rural communities.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper adopted the political systems theory. According to Laszlo and Krippner (1998) systems theories include contributions from such seminal thinkers as Alfred North Whitehead, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Anatol Rapoport, Kenneth Boulding, Paul A. Weiss, Ralph Gerard, Kurt Lewin, Roy R. Grinker, William Gray, Nicolas Rizzo, Karl Menninger, Silvano Arieti, and, in more recent years, the dynamical systems theorists, the family systems theorists, and those who deal with dissipative structures and holistic paradigms. Laszlo and Krippner (1998) point out that the advantage of systems theory is its potential to provide a trans-disciplinary framework for a simultaneously critical and normative exploration of the relationship between our perceptions and conceptions and the worlds they purport to represent. Hence, the ideas of citizens can only be understood through incorporating them into the systems

of decision making processes. An observation was drawn from the systems theory to say that violence and chaos in the world is a result of the exclusion of the public in decision making by the ruling elites (Laszlo and Krippner, 1998).

The systems theory takes the world as an organization, a conception that it can be substantiated and can change the basic categories upon which thought rests, and profoundly influence practical attitudes. According to Laszlo and Krippner (1998), every element of a system is interdependent and there is no element or component which will solemnly stand alone. This implies that the government cannot be able to make congruent and consistent policies without the involvement of the citizens of the state. A system includes individuals and communities and these are the ones who have a potential to recognise the changing nature of the environment, the world they are in as well as the problems besetting them. The general systems approach encourages the development of a global, more unitary consciousness, team work, collaboration, learning for life, and exposure

to the universal storehouse of accumulated knowledge and wisdom as pointed out by Laszlo and Krippner (1998).

The systems theory shows that the government can manage to accommodate the knowledge-constitutive interests of the citizens through integrating them in decision making which is a cry of most Zimbabweans when it comes to policy making. Laszlo and Krippner's systems theory pursues five areas of commitment: critical awareness, social awareness, complementarianism at the methodology level, complementary at the theory level, and human emancipation.

Through the five commitments, the rural people will be enabled to analyse the assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses of the theoretical underpinnings of any economic policy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The collection of data involved a couple of phases. The first phase was desk review of literature. In the second phase primary data collection was done through

conducting face to face interviews with 80 community members who included unemployed and employed youths and old people, local councillors, communal people, district level government officials and the general community. All the people interviewed were rural natives of Zimbabwe from the two districts of Binga and Chivi. Respondents were purposively selected.

Interview guides which enhanced close contact between the researcher and the research participants, were used to collect data with the help of two research assistants. The process was interactive and developmental and allowed emergent issues to be explored as suggested by Moriarty (2011) and to understand any phenomenon in its complexity as advanced by Ospina (2004).

Ethics were eminently valued during the collection of primary data from the informants. Consent was sought from the respondents before taking part in the research. The participation of respondents in the study was voluntary and no reward was given to them.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Approaches to policy making*

An analysis of existing literature shows that polities have strategies for economic policy formulation and implementation and Zimbabwe is not an exception. What differs is the approach to policy formulation, its implementation and its affinity to societal goals-realization. The most realised approaches are the top-down and the bottom-up approaches to policy formulation and borrowing from Karl Marx's dream of equality there is need for hybrid approach to policy formulation. This approach looks into contributions of all people in economic policies.

The top-down approach is where a group (or groups) of power holders formulate policies on behalf of the masses and only come to the populace to seek their endorsement and support. This kind of approach is more populist and against the ethos of. On the other side, there is a bottom-up approach which is characterized by inclusiveness and respect of the people's views. In this ideology the

civilians are a colossal player in policy success. It's quite agreeable that this approach increases the degree of policy ownership and therefore guarantees policy success.

### ***General knowledge on economic policies***

The respondents described economic policies as the laws put in place by the government for everyone in the country to follow. Other respondents lacked understanding of what a policy means; whether economic, public or any other policy. An economic policy was viewed as a law which is good for everyone and others went on to describe economic policies as programmes implemented by the government to address community problems. Though some tried to define a public policy, the majority of people have shown that they don't have knowledge about economic policies.

### ***Policies known by the rural people***

Rusare (2014) pointed out that Zimbabwe has tried many economic blue prints since 1980 based on growth and equity. Examples of policies crafted by the Zimbabwe

government since 1980 include Vision 2020, Millennium Recovery Programme(MERP) of 2000-2002, the 100 day plan, the National Economic Development Priority Programme (NEDPP), the Medium Term Plan (MTP) and the current Zimbabwe Agenda for Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim-Asset) 2013-2018 to mention but a few. However, the rural community never recognised the existence of these policies.

Adoption of political manifestos has been a major trend and setback on Zimbabwe's endeavours to promote public participation since independence. Biti (2014) dismissed the Zim-Asset as a political statement which is the worst economic policy which Zimbabwe has ever seen since 1980 due to its exclusivity nature of sidelining the populace. He said most of the crafted policies in Zimbabwe are incongruent and inconsistent with the poor's needs. One respondent said that the so called economic policies in Zimbabwe are political slogans crafted to benefit those vying for political positions during the electoral period.

### *Participation of rural people in policy formulation*

According to Gurts (nd) the main process of policy making consists of four 'phases': initiation, formulation, implementation and evaluation. It includes identifying the problem, formulating a solution, identifying different alternatives, selecting from those alternatives on the basis of their impact and laying them down in some type of statement or law. However, this is not the case with the Zimbabwean scenario when it comes to the participation of the rural population in policy formulation.

From the research it came out that the rural populations are just policy consumers, their views are not considered and a top-down approach to policy formulation and implementation is rife in Zimbabwe. One of the key informants noted that the government is responsible for identifying the problems for the people, and the rural population is only considered when the politicians need votes.

The rural population in Zimbabwe is not involved in economic policy formulation due to information

inaccessibility by the people in these areas as was elaborated by one respondent. In the long run these policies have tended to be incongruent and shyly address the challenges of the rural citizens. The knowledge on economic policies is more manifestos oriented; people know catch phrases of their party policies and in essence, the policy cycle is more predatory and emanates from few individuals.

The Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP), a World Bank prescription which was a wrong prescription after all is remembered for the social wounds it has created (Kanyenze, 2013). The Indian saying that ‘anything without us is not for us’ becomes relevant if one takes into account the manifestations which followed ESAP implementation on the turn of the millennium as suggested by one participant.

The overall view is that policy formulation and implementation is not inclusive and lacks input of the masses and this has resulted in many economic policies failing to address the national challenges, for example the Zim-Asset policy has not yet found serious funders

because of its political manifesto like phraseology (Kanyenze, 2013). It's dressed with intolerable language and Kanyenze (2013) went on to say that it emanated from the politburo (one of the ruling Party's decision making organs) and has no national ownership, masses are reduced to spectators and it's a recipe for failure.

Some social commentators like Ibbo Mandaza in Muvundusi (2013) are of the view that the problem in Zimbabwe's policy cycle is on the knowledge of economic policies. In a critique of President Robert Mugabe and his cabinet, he said Zimbabwe's policies are very good but they don't have implementers. He goes on to say that, for a society to come up with quality economic policies, quantity is not a pre-requisite. Zim-Asset, MERP, Vision 2020, the Look East Policy to mention but a few are quality policies which could have resuscitated Zimbabwe's social standing. Mandaza says they have their flaws but 'flawed diamonds are better than clear pebbles'.

Kuwaza (2014) pointed out that Zim-Asset borrows from the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front's

(Zanu-PF) manifesto and previous national development programmes which justifies the idea that economic policies sometimes come straight from the minds of the politicians. Kanyenze (2013) went on to say that Zim-Asset was extracted from the Zanu-PF manifesto and therefore has violated the idea of having people driven policies and the economic blue print did not come from the people.

Though parliamentarians are elected to represent the people, most of them do not stay in their constituencies and the rural people doubt their ideas in parliamentary debates as they know little about the needs of people they represent. Biti (2014) said that the disease with the government of Zimbabwe is that they think that they know all and never listen and apologise.

The people showed anxiety to participate in decision making as they said that most of the economic policies are just hearsays and they see them on political t-shirts being advertised, and sometimes they come as adverts on radios. Policy makers are said to have been producing policies basing on assumptions of the needs of the people

and simultaneously making the policies unrealistic and not addressing the needs of the rural people.

The people will build trust on the government through their participation in decision making, which will in turn reduce the chances of social unrest in a country like Zimbabwe. Moreover, the participation of the rural people ensures sustainable development.

However, some of the research participants said that it is helpless for the people to participate in decision making since their ideas always get rejected by the policy makers.

### ***Policies and rural demands***

Public economic policies crafted for the people have on rare cases met the demands of the rural people. One respondent acknowledged that some of the economic policies crafted by the government for them were important whereas the majority of the economic policies were irrelevant to the people's needs. The policies have been blamed by research participants for increasing unemployment amongst rural people and increasing

congestion as well as land fragmentation in the communal areas of Zimbabwe due to the increased migration of the retrenched human resource in urban spheres to the communal farms.

Policies have come and gone but the rural demands have mounted with the increase of policies. People are not informed of the decisions by the government, are not allowed as on paper to contribute their ideas towards the problems identified by the government as well as the recommended solutions to the problems.

One of the key informants said that economic policies such as the Indigenization Policy have not benefitted the people across the country as resources are not evenly distributed. This policy requires that foreign owned companies cede 51% of their companies to indigenous Zimbabweans. Respondents said some companies failed to meet this requirement and closed. Like ESAP this policy has accelerated the speed of unemployment, hence people resorting to the already struggling sector of agriculture as a way of survival.

The government is excluding the concept of community based participation in economic policy formulation despite the fact that there are structures existing such as Ward Development Committees and the Village Development Committees as one of the village heads had to put it. These structures no longer play their roles in terms of development, decision making and participation of the rural populace as they are being used to reinforce the political parties in rural areas. During the formulation process, the rural population are outcasts and are allowed to play part during the implantation phase when they see that their policies are vagrant and only the poor can accommodate the policies.

A resident from Chivi said that the policy makers do not know the rural needs, interests and demands and they go to the parliament to craft economic policies for them. These economic policies are considered to be self-enrichment for the councillors and parliamentarians. The Tokwe Mukosi dam project has been pointed out to be one of the ideas meant to benefit the government officials only and the ideas of the people were not taken into

consideration. The people did not want to be relocated from the places they had lived for several years.

On the other hand, a small percentage agreed that some of the economic policies like the Land Reform were had benefitted.

## **CONCLUSION**

The process of economic policy formulation in Zimbabwe is hinged on the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. Economic policy making in Zimbabwe is usually a duty of bureaucrats whilst the duty of the rural people is to consume the economic policies only without participation in the process. The business people are consulted for funding, the civil society is there to complement and academics are consulted to analyse the feasibility of the economic policies before implementation, hence the communal populations lack understanding of the meaning of public economic policies.

The exclusion of the masses has negative repercussions as the people tend to reject the economic policies on the implementation phase. Further, this leads to failure of the economic policies to address real life needs of the rural people, and increasing political opposition to the ruling party.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The government and policy makers need to embrace modern forms of governance which are anchored on citizen participation. Communities in the rural areas today are encouraged to grapple with issues ranging from economic and geopolitical, to social and cultural, to scientific, environmental and health concerns to make informed judgments and contribute efficiently at local, regional, national and even international levels as voters and as citizen advocates.

Policy makers should take a leading role and recognise the role of the citizen in economic policy making and policy formulation. More so, economic policies have to be made accessible to the citizens in all forms of

understandable language. Public policy makers must embrace the use of technology and the media in conveying information about public economic policies to the rural communities

The correlation between the policy environment and policy decisions is quite visible in public economic policies crafted and implemented in any environment and the government of Zimbabwe is recommended to separate political patronage from economic policies.

The government should govern by public consent and there is need for the civil society to play their traditional role of being the watchmen over government flaws and lobby on behalf of citizens for recognition of their concerns in policy making.

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