

Transforming cities: The role of local government-university collaborations in urban governance in Zimbabwe



 Tawanda Nyikadzino ^{(a)*}  Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad ^(b)

^(a) Post-doctoral Research Fellow, School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy; College of Business and Economics; University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

^(b) Professor, School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy; College of Business and Economics; University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

Global research on local governance acknowledges the value of partnerships as strategic facilitators of urban change and regional economic growth. Local government-university interactions have emerged as a critical catalyst for transformation in Africa. The Mutare City Council (MCC), a distinguished local authority in Zimbabwe, has adopted collaborations between local government and universities as a novel strategy to enhance service delivery and overall efficacy. Nonetheless, despite a theoretical and practical paradigm shift towards cooperation between local governments and universities, there has been inadequate research focus on this subject, particularly in developing nations. This article elucidates the lived experiences of the MCC regarding cooperation between local government and universities to bridge this gap. The qualitative investigation of local government-university partnership was conducted through key informant interviews with MCC managers from various units and departments. This article outlines the MCC's collaboration with universities in urban change and the advantages of these partnerships. The paper examines the problems encountered in executing collaborations from the viewpoint of local government. Consequently, the study advises local governments to prioritise collaborations with universities, endorse joint projects and initiatives, and create research and investment units to promote partnerships as a contribution to public administration.

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Introduction

African cities face complex policy issues, including service delivery difficulties and obstacles stemming from rising urbanisation, alongside resource limitations that require resolution (Taute, 2021; Banka & Sibanda, 2018; Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). The constraints of service delivery in numerous African cities have prompted the creation of novel and inventive solutions for redress and transformation. The transition from New Public Management (NPM) to New Public Governance (NPG) has necessitated novel and innovative approaches for urban transformation and the provision of public value grounded in networked governance (Fongwa, 2023; Taute, 2021). Efforts to revitalise urban areas have imposed significant pressure on local government officials to adopt innovative approaches (Pillay, 2019). The ability of cities to effectively and efficiently meet rising service delivery demands has been questioned. Pillay (2019) accurately asserts that this compelled cities to "reconsider their roles and transform themselves – transitioning from mere providers of municipal services to developmental leaders, orchestrators, collaborators, and brokers in fulfilling their mandates in developmental local government." Consequently, cities across have adopted innovative strategies and entrepreneurial methods to meet service delivery obligations and evolve into smart cities.

Collaboration has been acknowledged in both theory and practice as a vital technique for cultivating relationships that affect urban environments (Pillay, 2019; Paterson & Addie, 2019). Pillay (2019) asserts that "partnerships, strategic alliances, collaborations, and a mutually beneficial symbiosis between local government and higher education institutions provide the potential for substantial institutional connectivity and cultural orientations within a shared spatial footprint." Collaborative arrangements allow cities to utilise

* Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9811-6252

stakeholders' distinct competencies and strengths to tackle intricate service delivery difficulties that have plagued them for decades (Taute, 2021). By engaging external stakeholders, municipalities may align service delivery with demand, guarantee cost-effectiveness, and restore public confidence.

This assertion is supported by the arguments of scholars like Vyas-Doorgapersad and Aktan (2017:2-3), who highlighted that transformations in political, economic, and social contexts, along with paradigm shifts in administration and the global pursuit of sustainable development goals, necessitated further evolution and innovative concepts in governance (in Vyas-Doorgapersad & Shava, 2021:39). Consequently, collaboration among scholars and government authorities in public administration, management Think tanks can be created to facilitate collaboration between academics and bureaucrats in generating ideas and tactics for attaining nation-specific collective development objectives. Local government-university interactions have emerged as a challenge to the "elitist concept of universities as detached ivory towers," which persists in influencing higher education policymaking (Paterson & Addie, 2019). Paterson and Addie (2019) asserted that "urban universities are frequently perceived as existing in the city, rather than being integral to and serving the city." Over the last twenty years, communities have acknowledged the synergies and numerous growth prospects linked to partnerships and collaborations with universities (Taute, 2021; Paterson & Addie, 2019). Universities, as hubs of knowledge generation, are strategically situated to foster innovations that advance equitable development in their local and regional contexts. Fongwa (2023) asserts that universities ought to function as anchor institutions, delivering research-driven policy interventions and innovations through a place-based strategy, while avoiding excessive localism. Bank and Sibanda (2018:701) assert Universities located in urban areas have emerged as significant contributors to the economic and developmental strategies of such communities. Universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) serve as the new catalysts for development, guiding the developmental processes of cities and regions. Consequently, towns must establish connections with both domestic and international institutions to enhance the lives of their residents. Consequently, many legislative measures have been implemented to guarantee that universities and institutes of higher education stay pertinent to the developmental needs of their local communities. For example, Agenda 2063 acknowledges the significance of higher education institutions in development via research, community participation, and instruction at the continental level. The Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) emphasises the pivotal role of tertiary education in local and national development agendas, highlighting university-industry partnership as essential for progress (Teferra, 2018; Fongwa, 2023).

Due to a deficiency in human, infrastructural, and financial resources for enhancing service delivery, cities in Zimbabwe have sought collaborations with universities, hence rendering local government transformation a collaborative endeavour. Against this backdrop, the Mutare City Council (MCC), in its ambition "to be a centre of excellent service delivery and a premier investment destination by 2030" (Mutare City Council, 2023), has significantly invested in strategic collaborations with local universities. Notwithstanding a paradigm shift towards collaborations between local governments and universities, there remains a dearth of research focused on this domain, particularly in Zimbabwe. There is a paucity of material regarding collaborations between local governments and universities in Zimbabwe and Africa. This article elucidates the lived experiences of the MCC regarding cooperation between local government and universities to bridge this gap. It examines the purpose, characteristics, and advantages of relationships between the MCC and universities, as well as other institutions of higher education; identifies enablers and barriers, and gives proposals that may serve as lessons for other cities in Zimbabwe and the developing globe. The article contends that institutionalised and well exploited relationships between local governments and universities can significantly contribute to urban renewal and change. They can empower local governments to attain national and sustainable development objectives.

This article contributes in two ways. The paper provides an empirical contribution by illustrating how local governments in Zimbabwe have adjusted to the complicated, volatile, and uncertain environment, specifically on the measures employed to enhance service delivery. This article proposes that local governments collaborate with universities to develop tailored and economical interventions and innovations. Thus, Ferreira, Broughton, Broadhurst, and Ferreira (2023:2) assert that local government administrators "have evolved into brokers of collaborative innovation." Secondly, the article contributes theoretically by enhancing the literature on partnership between local governments and universities in developing nations.

This article is structured as follows: the initial portion offers conceptual clarification and a review of the literature. Subsequent to this section, a methodology section follows. Subsequent to the technique, the researchers delineate the principal findings of the investigation. The paper concludes with findings and suggestions.

Literature Review

This study focuses on collaborative governance - a concept that has gained prominence in governance literature for the past three decades (Ferreira, Broughton, Broadhurst, & Ferreira, 2023; Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023; Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh, 2012). Collaborative governance has been widely defined in the literature. However, before defining collaborative governance, it is important to understand governance as a concept. Emerson et al. (2012:2) define governance as the involvement, control, and steering of various actors and processes to make decisions that guide organisations towards attaining set goals and objectives. Thus, governance is a key concept embedded in the NPG which emphasises inclusivity, participation and involvement of different actors across organisational boundaries. Governance, simply put, focuses on involving stakeholders and fostering interactions to enhance organisational performance (Taute, 2021; Ferreira, et al., 2023). Based on the preceding conceptualisation of governance,

collaborative governance involves a working relationship that draws on the involvement of various stakeholders, within and outside the government sector, to address public problems and deliver services (Lahat & Sher-Hadar, 2020:119). According to Nyikadzino and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2023:448), “collaborative governance emphasises a shift towards networked governance hinged on mutuality, reciprocity and shared responsibility which places stakeholders at the centre of development”. Collaborative governance arrangements involve policy strategies of engaging stakeholders constructively across tiers and agencies of government, the business sector and voluntary not-for-profit organisations (Emerson et al., 2012:2; Taute, 2021:5). Thus, collaborative governance is a strategic and innovative response to complex, wicked and interconnected policy problems that confront governments worldwide. It emerged from the understanding that governments, without partnerships, cannot address modern public issues sufficiently.

Some scholars have added collaborative innovation as an extension of collaborative governance. Collaborative innovation denotes government collaborations with other external players to spur innovation. Eggers, Shalabh & Goldsmith (2009:98 quoted by Ferreira et al., 2023:3) define collaborative innovation as the utilisation of “innovation assets of a diverse base of organisations and individuals to discover, develop, and implement ideas within and outside organisational boundaries.” Collaborative innovations stimulate the exchange of knowledge and ideas among individuals and organisations, both private and public (Ferreira et al., 2023:3). Through cross-fertilisation of ideas, public organisations can develop creative and innovative solutions to public problems.

Extant literature highlights several conditions necessary for building and sustaining local government-university collaborations. Most importantly, collaborations excel where relationships are anchored on trust, openness and mutuality (Fongwa, 2023; Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). Where there is trust, empathy and mutual vision, actors can manage differences in the innovative value-creation process. Pillay (2019) and Paterson & Addie (2019) indicate that the success of local government-university collaborations, like any other collaboration, depends on mutuality, trust, shared interests and vision and place-based leadership. Collaborations and partnerships require specific competencies in public managers, including flexibility, negotiation, and communication skills (Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh, 2012; Lahat & Sher-Hadar, 2020). As such, public managers should be master managers who can broker collaborations and partnerships to transform public organisations. Barbara, Hart & Torfing (2017: 656 quoted by Ferreira et al 2023:4) state that public managers should be “orchestrators of networked interaction and mutual learning”. Peeter and Arho (2021:405) highlight the importance of establishing and maintaining platforms for stakeholders to interact. Such arenas provide avenues for negotiations and conflict resolution where there will be disagreements. The institutionalisation of conflict through arenas for interaction such as committees and roundtables builds trust, social capital and, ultimately, legitimacy (Peeter and Arho, 2021:405; Barbara, Hart & Torfing, 2017). To avoid a Hobbesian state of nature, Ostrom (2005:211) suggests establishing a set of rules to control and influence human behaviour and information use. In cases of disagreements, Peeter & Arho (2021) and Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad (2023) emphasise the use of internal remedies rather than using other means to bypass them.

Although collaborative governance has been widely adopted to transform cities, the literature demonstrates several implementation challenges. For instance, Onyango (2023) found that most African cities lack clear governance structures and systems, which are critical for the success of collaborations. Furthermore, the study revealed resource distribution complexities, coordination gaps and inter-agency clashes that hamper the effective execution of collaborative initiatives. Widespread inter-agency tensions affect joint actions (Kimberly et al., 2022; Onyango, 2023). Similarly, Kimberly et al., (2022) argue that African local authorities struggle to implement collaborative governance initiatives due to competing priorities and resource constraints. Their study also highlighted fragmented roles and responsibilities as a critical factor hindering effective collaboration in implementing WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) service provision. Literature in Africa (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023; Chigova & Nyikadzino, 2024) also identified weak leadership and inadequate management commitment as factors compromising the efficacy of collaborative programmes and projects.

Research and Methodology

The article followed a purely qualitative research approach as “it emphasises the careful and detailed description of social practice” (Sibanda 2015:45, in Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad 2020:235). The rationale was therefore to gain a deep understanding of the MCC's experiences with local government-university collaborations. It sought to obtain the MCC officials' perceptions and views on the contribution of local government-university collaborations to urban transformation and sustainable development (Mohajan, 2018:28; Creswell, 2009:6). To allow an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of the MCC officials regarding local government-university collaborations, the researchers collected data using face to face key informant interviews lasting for approximately 40 minutes each. The interviews were conducted by the first author who resides in Zimbabwe. Interviews were audio recorded subject to participants' consent. The MCC's management was purposively selected based on their involvement in strategic decision-making. The researchers felt junior employees might not possess rich information on the subject matter. A sample of seven participants was selected based on theoretical saturation. Data saturation involves a process whereby the collection of additional data would not add any new insights into the subject under exploration – the participants repeat what could have been said in previous interviews (Babbie, 2007:99; Creswell, 2009).

To comply with research ethics, it is usually best to state the responses using pseudonyms (institution and year). The confidentiality and anonymity of employees and portfolios can be safeguarded under this arrangement. Pseudonyms, such as R1–R7, are used to identify responses in this study. Since all responders are from MCC and the interviews took place in 2024, duplicate data (year and institution) is omitted. Since the responses were recorded verbatim, the respondents' thoughts, feelings, and opinions were preserved

without modification. The collected data was analysed manually. The data was initially transcribed from audio to text, making it more usable than before. Transcription helps the researchers develop an initial understanding of participants' views and perspectives. Labels were used to identify and group recurring words, sentences and phrases into themes and subthemes that inform the headings in the findings section.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, the researchers present and discuss the study's findings.

An overview of university collaborations in the MCC and their benefits

To improve local governance and service delivery, the MCC management is collaborating with a raft of universities. The study found that the City is collaborating in various ways with the following institutions of higher learning: the Harare Institute of Technology (HIT), Manicaland State University of Applied Science (MSUAS), Africa University, Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT), Midlands State University (MSU), Mutare Teachers' College and Mutare Polytechnic, as confirmed by MCC respondents (R1, R2, R4 and R5). R1 further indicated that MCC is prepared to collaborate with any university in the country.

MCC-HIT Collaboration

Although the MCC is collaborating with several universities, participants highlighted the MCC-HIT collaboration as their major collaboration. This collaboration involved the development of a home-grown Enterprise Resource Package (ERP) solution, a digital solution integrated across all departments. This led to the development of the Local Authority Digital System (LADS), a system with several modules. An interview with R7, one of the software engineers from HIT stationed at the MCC's Civic Centre, revealed that, at the time of data collection, the arrangement had yielded 34 modules. Some of the notable modules include the travel and subsistence allowance; stores and inventory; procurement; voucher management; payment plan; licensing; asset management; receipting; billing; tariff modelling; waiting list; stand allocation; lease tracking; cemetery management; markets management; fleet management; water management; land management; performance management; human resources; customer relations management; document e-filing; notifications; mail; file movement; help desk systems; and minutes module. The modules were developed through the Proof of Concept Laboratory (PoCL) model, an arrangement that involved HIT software engineers stationed at the MCC offices to develop modules based on the operational challenges brought by the MCC officials. R2 illustrated that the MCC and HIT agreed to set up an innovation centre, a research full-time office, which is stationed at MCC Civic Centre. R2 further explained that,

Through that collaboration, we have five full-time engineers who are stationed here. Every month we sit down with the engineers and bring a write-up of what we want digitalised. The engineers then develop systems that address the concerns raised in various areas such as licensing, processing of payments, procurement processes even our housing process from waiting list up to allocation and lease management. We have digitalised several areas. So it's becoming a big project.

To further explain how the PoCL works, R4 explained,

Whenever we have ideas as directors, for example, with issues of housing and leases, we have so many leases that were issued way back and they have not been renewed because we are using a manual system. You only know maybe when the person comes that we have this property that was under lease. When you open the file that's when you realise this is a leased property which has got a lease that has not been renewed for 10 years. Especially for rental leases that are supposed to be renewed on an annual basis. So now what the system does is we then tell them that we need a system that can address this issue. We have these issues so can you come up with a system so that we can track our leases and also send reminders for the leases that expired? They have created a system that flags out that the lease has expired and needs to be renewed.

The arrangement was meant to facilitate responsiveness in the automation of processes, procedures and services (R4; R7). The MCC-HIT collaboration led to the establishment of a company. According to R1, the MCC signed a shareholding certificate with HIT and the system developer. R2 noted,

With HIT we have a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that is five years old now. With that MoU, we then reduced it to an agreement with contractual obligations on both ends and now we have formed a co-owned company and are finalising the registrations but have agreed to form a company.

Respondents revealed efforts to ensure that LADS will go for certification by Earnest and Young shortly. The formation of a company was largely driven by the central role the MCC played in developing the modules and the need to gain from the investments. As explained by R4,

Most of the modules have been developed in Mutare. We are like the guinea pig - we do all the donkey work that's why our arrangement is different from any other local authority that wants to use the system. Others pay licenses and so forth, but we are not paying licenses. We are paying for the development which is why maybe very soon our partnership will be moving from just a memorandum of understanding where we will be paying for development every month for the work they would have done. We are now moving to be a key partner in terms of shareholding arrangement. We want a stake because most of the work is with us here so

when they sell a module, we are also interested in that because of the level of effort, resources and time that we have committed to this arrangement as City of Mutare.

Interviews with MCC management revealed that LADS had attracted the attention of the parent Ministry of Local Government, which has since started mandating the other local authorities to adopt the system (R1; R2; R4). R1 further indicated that the system has attracted the interests of other government institutions, The Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ), Minerals Corporation Board (MCB) and FBC Bank, which is a registered commercial bank (refer to the website of FBC Bank, 2024).

The adoption of LADS was mainly necessitated by using foreign licenses. R2 revealed,

Up to now, we have been using systems that are either imported from Europe or South Africa and, at times, we experienced challenges particularly when those systems are not designed to our specifications. We are somehow forced to fit into the design of those systems. Also at times, we struggle because of foreign currency issues when we want to pay licenses because licenses are strictly in foreign currency but, with this new system, there are options for us to pay in local currency as our currency that is acceptable by both ends and also at the same time support has been an issue with other ERPs. We also experience challenges with the local agencies of foreign systems who, at times, are not up to the task and, have not been giving us the services that we expected for us to use the systems effectively. So, we then decided that let's gradually develop our solutions.

In support of the above view, R3 had this to say,

We needed to make sure that the system was working perfectly. We moved to the new system because the system we were using was good but lacked support. So, with HIT, they are developing a custom-made ERP. You document your procedures, and they develop modules according to the procedures that you want. If you test and see that this is not working well, you always tailor make to suit the conditions of the user. It's an advantage to use because they will not develop what we don't want like other systems where you buy an ERP with its modules that you will not use. Some of them are developed in a way that you don't want. Here they train us as they develop the modules and as we test, we are also getting capacity. When they (HIT engineers) are developing the modules, they will be talking to us, the users in different departments. We can then go in the chamber with the management team and other interested people and then they beam the systems, and we interrogate them, we change what we want to change and then they (modules) are deployed. After they develop any system, we have to have a meeting with them.

In the words of R1,

We are trying to digitise our systems after realising the impact or the pain of paying foreign licenses. With foreign systems, you are obliged to pay licenses, for example, the City of Harare wanted to procure an ERP for 57 million USD so what will be left for service delivery? So, we are trying to build our own ERP using our own resources and local universities through Education 5.0.

Other collaborations

The MCC is also involved in collaborations with other institutions of higher learning. For instance, the MCC has MoUs with Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT) and Mutare Teachers College, which involve the supply of staff uniforms, particularly for municipal police, meter readers, and nurses (R1; R2; R4). These are not research-based, they have to do with the supply of goods. R4 explained that they obtain many uniforms from colleges and universities. R4 illustrated,

We have seen that with procurement laws it is easy to work with universities because that's direct procurement. You don't need to seek three quotations and it makes our life easy because we had challenges, especially with uniforms – tenders changing prices etc. At some point, we were failing to provide uniforms as a requirement. We were always in trouble with the National Social Security Authority (NASSA) for failure to provide workers with the requisite uniforms.

The study found that the MCC collaborates with the Manicaland State University of Applied Science (MSUAS). This collaboration covers administrative issues such as capacity-building training and the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs). R1 revealed that the MSUAS trained the MCC employees on customer care and reviewed MCC's policies to align them to IPSAS. R3 also highlighted that the MSUAS developed an SOP or manual for the finance department. R3 revealed,

We developed a manual that we follow as the department of finance when doing our accounting. Any procedure that is done in finance is documented into one, for example, how to record assets and depreciate them. It's about standardisation of procedures, for example, if you go to billing, for example, you don't have to ask you go there you find the manual and you start working following the stipulated stages. The procedure stipulates who is authorising, and who is implementing.

Participants further indicated that the MCC is working on a MoU with the University of Zimbabwe and Kwekwe Polytechnic. The MoU with the UZ focuses on construction projects. The MCC officials realised the UZ has strength in construction. R2, who visited some of the UZ's construction works, explained "they are constructing a state-of-the-art hospital. We visited those projects, and we were excited, and we signed an agreement. We look forward to getting assistance from the UZ". R2 further illustrated "we want to start a fuel retail project. So, we are diversifying into more fields to try and improve revenue and lessen the burden on the part of residents". Through the UZ collaboration, the MCC officials are targeting to revamp and digitalise bus ranks. According to R4, the agreement was signed and awaits activation.

Contribution of local government-university collaborations towards urban transformation in the MCC

The views of the MCC officials who participated in the study showed that local government-university collaborations have transformed the City Council making it one of the best-performing local authorities in Zimbabwe. These partnerships have helped the City to improve its operations across departments and sectors. Firstly, participants acknowledged that, through collaborations, the City managed to digitise most of its operations thereby improving revenue collection. Commenting on the MCC-HIT collaboration, R3 noted that “It’s a partnership that has helped us a lot be it in terms of improving revenue collection through some of the modules that are financial like the payment plan, markets and parking.” In support of the preceding view, R4 explained that,

When we introduced systems for our markets, our revenue improved tremendously for our markets because for markets we have traders in a market, and they are paying dollar so the honour was upon the cashier to cash in what they feel they want to cash in. But now the system links your name to your database. So, if you pay to the cashier in the system, you are not recorded as paid so we simply repose the market for failure to pay. Because we know that this table on this pay you paid, or you didn't. Cashiers now have a gadget that they use which is LADS-linked.

R3 also illustrated that the HIT partnership with the MCC has benefited the City in terms of improving revenue collection. R3 explained that around 2019 revenue collection efficiency was at around 32 -33%. But now, over the past two years, when the Council started utilising most of the LADS’s finance-related modules, efficiency rates were ranging between 65 and 75 (R1; R3; R4). R2 argued that “With systems, you close the leakages and contain cost. The other aspect which is important again is knowing your cost. If you don’t know your cost with the size of our city, you cannot plan. With tariffs modelling module, we are now able to plan”. Participants claim that the MCC has the highest revenue collection efficiency in Zimbabwe. R1 claimed that “We don’t shy to say in 2022 the MCC collected more revenue than the City of Bulawayo, which is 6 or 7 times bigger than the City of Mutare. For every dollar we bill we collect between 67 to 72 cents”. The participant (R1) further indicated that “We are the only local authority without statutory obligations. The only local authority with tax clearance in Zimbabwe so far”. These achievements are attributable to the deployment of LADS systems that eradicated corruption and improved operational efficiency.

Participants revealed that LADS modules helped the Council in improving transparency and accountability. The introduction of store management, which manages fuel, one of the biggest cost drivers for local authorities, from requisition to issuance reduced the abuse of fuel by council management and drivers. According to R7, the fuel management system curbed fuel abuse. R7 illustrated that “Fuel requisitions are now based on mileage covered. The systems capture the average distances covered by refuse collection trucks and determine fuel needs. This protects council employees from the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) as well as protecting council resources.” The LADS helped in controlling costs that emanated from extravagance in the use of council resources. R4 illustrated that,

As local authorities, we don't just want to collect. If you collect and you don't manage the cost it becomes a problem. You need to collect and contain the cost. So, cost containment is through systems like fuel. Before we introduced the fuel management system, people used to go and collect fuel because allocations were done manually. Someone goes and says I want 20 litres and the following week they go they get 40 litres, but you are not looking at the mileage. This week you collected 20 litres same mileage next week you want 40 litres. So that explanation now there is no efficiency in the utilisation of resources. You need efficiency in the utilisation of resources. So when you use a system, now people know they are being monitored and tracked so you can only get fuel which is commensurate to your work.

Furthermore, the introduction of the voucher management system and document e-filing has helped the council to safeguard important information and documents. Such systems improve corporate governance. As Illustrated by R1,

We are the first local authority to be audited with all the information – the Auditor General confirmed this. Our voucher management system provides all the information from request to buy, procurement, comparative schedule, delivery note and invoice. Everything is in the system. So even if you destroy the physical papers we can still go into the system. We are still keeping the papers because auditors use these physical papers, they are not yet clever to audit through the systems.

Participants also felt that local government-university collaborations helped them evade procurement complexities and reduce costs. It was found that procuring goods and services from universities was cheaper compared to the private sector. Participants revealed that by working with universities they can leverage on the issues of cost as well. The study also found that the MCC, through collaborations with universities, enjoyed exemptions from following tiresome procurement rules and regulations. R1 illustrated that,

We managed to evade procurement processes by signing the MoU. It takes you 92 days to conclude a tender. If that tender fails, you start again. You can keep the money for the whole year without buying anything. We are losing value because of the tiresome procurement regulations. Through MoUs with universities, we can do direct procurement.

When explaining the benefits of local government-university collaborations, R3 explained that “You don’t need to go to the Procurement Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (PRAZ) tender process. You go straight and get whatever services or consultancy you want. The process becomes fast, and their charges are quite minimal unlike going to the market to find a consultant”.

Challenges and factors that support local government-university Collaboration

The study highlighted bureaucracy, especially among state universities, as a major challenge delaying local government-university collaboration. As government institutions, state universities are associated with bureaucratic processes that slow the adoption and implementation of collaborations. This was noted by R2 who explained,

There are certain hierarchical procedures that you have to endure before you tie down a Vice-Chancellor to an agreement. It's not easy but we have insisted that we don't want to engage their small companies we want agreements with universities for continuity and sustenance. The university will be there forever. Once we have a relationship with a university, we know it will sustain into the future. Generally, it takes time to initiate a proposal, and explain your vision and, in most cases, when we approach universities, they will tell us we have never had such kind of a collaboration with a local authority – it's unique we need to look into your proposal, and they also have to go through their internal processes to get approvals up to University Council. It takes time to then sign an agreement.

In support of the preceding view, Paterson & Addie (2019) note that “to foster effective engagement between universities and cities, several bureaucratic obstacles must be overcome. Universities and cities tend to speak different languages in pursuit of their goals, even when these may be complementary. It can also be difficult to identify counterparts in their parallel bureaucracies”. R6 echoed the same sentiments “Like with HIT we have had a lot of back and forth. We deployed a system, and there were challenges, we feedback, and they attended to it, we redeployed until in most of our systems now we have completely dropped manual”. The above experiences underscore the need for patience and leadership commitment to initiate and implement collaborations. As is the case with other partnerships, there are some inevitable difficulties that local government managers have to endure to enjoy the long-term benefits of collaborations. Thus, collaborations demand a shift in public managers' roles and perceptions of collaborations. In the view of Ferreira et al. (2023:4), “If they perceive their role as bureaucratic rule-followers who adhere to professional standards they are unlikely to have an interest in collaborative innovation, whereas those who identify with a more entrepreneurial role and see themselves as facilitators, enablers and mediators are more likely to participate in collaborative innovation processes.”

The study also revealed some challenges related to service and product quality. R3 raised concerns about product quality. R3 explained,

We are still in our infancy, and I think we can do more. For issues of uniforms etc, we need to improve and upgrade our relationship to issues of quality. It's not just to say we come to university give us uniforms, work suits etc we compromise on aspects such as quality. That's not the ideal situation. We need to develop and explore these relationships further to improve quality. We are missing out and losing a lot.

However, these challenges are normal and should be expected in collaboration and the product or service development cycle. This was noted by R5 who revealed that,

When you start working together, challenges mainly then point to products that at the initial stage are not perfect, but this should be expected. When you develop a new product that has not been used anywhere else, you should know that you are going to experience some challenges. But we have agreed to perfect the ideas as we go.

The views shared above, again, underscore the importance of patience and willingness to learn from implementation experiences. In the words of R2, “It took America several years to send someone to the moon to go to space but now we are seeing innovations that are being deployed”. Innovations and entrepreneurial understandings require resilient and visionary leaders who accept failure and learn from implementation challenges. Public managers should realise that development is a process that starts from incapacity.

The study also highlighted inadequate funding as an important factor hampering investments in collaborations in Zimbabwe. R5 explained that,

As a country, we are not investing in research. I get inspired by a country that would invest over 100 years in a project even though in those 100 years the project will fail. But when it finally takes off, it will be a big deal. With research, you need to be patient. It takes time and can even fail. It's part of research.

In support of the above view, R2 revealed that the MCC is struggling to generate adequate revenue to sustain the implementation of collaborative initiatives. The participant attributed weak revenue collection to non-payment of rates by residents and government departments. Participants (R2; R5) further revealed that the central government is not adequately supporting local government through intergovernmental fiscal transfers. As Paterson & Addie (2019) argue, institutional and financial constraints limit the abilities of universities and cities to establish new urban socio-economic and cultural trajectories (Paterson & Addie, 2019). R5's preceding view encourages public managers in various tiers of government to perceive research positively and allocate sufficient funds to research and development.

Conclusions

To address the aforementioned issues and enhance relationships between local governments and universities, the report recommends the subsequent recommendations:

To enhance innovation and industrialisation at the local government level, the central government should promote and financially support collaborations between local governments and universities through a comprehensive governmental approach and Education 5.0. The government ought to allocate resources towards research and development and foster ideas between local governments and universities, exemplified by initiatives like the MCC. Local administrations should allocate funds for research expenditures. Universities may allocate funds for the development of articulation courses for university students and short courses to train municipal personnel. This joint agreement will improve public administration, management, and governance theory and practice. It will enhance service delivery, which is highlighted as a persistent difficulty at the local level, and equip college students to evaluate the practical dimensions of local government policies and procedures. The distant learning option is available as local government personnel may not consistently attend in person due to time-sensitive responsibilities. Zimbabwe can implement this approach from India, where distance learning colleges, notably the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), are proficient in delivering governance and management courses to remote towns through technology communication methods. This encompasses, among other elements, e-courses and online evaluations. Zimbabwe can derive insights from South Africa inside the African continent. Vyas-Doorgapersad (2012:135) emphasised that the University of South Africa provides a Short Learning Programme in Provincial and Local Government Law via distance learning, aimed at imparting knowledge and comprehension of provincial and local government operations, cooperative governance issues, policy development, and improving competencies pertinent to the roles, responsibilities, and functions of provincial and local government. The initiative seeks to empower local council members, municipal authorities, and National Council of Provinces members.

Municipal authorities and academic institutions ought to partner with local stakeholders to mobilise resources, share expertise, foster trust, and dismantle the silo mindset that obstructs collaboration. Municipalities and universities in Zimbabwe engage in collaboration. University students can secure internships with municipal offices by executing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Moreover, municipal employees may enrol in several universities to pursue further education. Universities can establish work-based learning programs for students and uncover skills deficiencies for staff by collaborating with local authorities to do competency-based evaluations. To facilitate the execution of such MoUs, it is essential to establish laws and procedures that direct interactions between local governments and universities. These may occur via committees. Such structures must be complemented by a comprehensive set of regulations and procedures to govern the behaviour of the participating parties. Interactions devoid of regulations would lead to a Hobbesian state of nature characterised by chaos. There is a necessity for local government-university seminars and conferences to facilitate network-building. This may manifest as shows wherein local governments highlight their challenges and universities display their inventions and research. These platforms facilitate collaborations and partnerships. Vyas-Doorgapersad and Simmonds (2009) underscore that the vision of public administration is contingent upon government performance. The scholarly and thorough exchange of ideas between the academic and administrative sectors is essential for the advancement of all facets of this distinctive discipline. Analysing past errors and rationally adapting the current will foster a more promising future for public administration.

The advantages of relationships between local governments and universities will not occur by coincidence; they necessitate intentional capacity-building initiatives for both academics and local government officials. Local government and university officials ought to get training on the significance of collaboration. Significant collaborations necessitate a shift in mentality among local governments and universities. Local governments require change agencies to facilitate partnership with universities. Collaboration relies on local factors, as certain managers may fail to recognise its significance. Contemporary developmental issues necessitate dynamic managers that are innovative visionaries and prepared to implement novel solutions that disrupt the status quo.

This study provided a framework for local governments in Zimbabwe and other developing nations to comprehend how interactions between local governments and universities might promote innovation and urban development. The study indicated that effective implementation of local government-university relationships can alter cities.

Limitations of the study

The research gathered data from a qualitative sample of seven senior officials in local government. The study excluded university faculty, community people, and other stakeholders. Subsequent research should incorporate these stakeholders to achieve a more comprehensive knowledge of collaborative governance.

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