# Examining the Effectiveness of Ward Development Committees in the Implementation of the Decentralisation Policy in Zambia: A Case of Chibombo District (2016-2021)

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**Abstract:** *Since Zambia attained political independence from Britain in 1964, a commitment to decentralisation and popular participation has been an important component of local governance reforms. Consequently, over years governments have sought to design and implement decentralised local governance to facilitate wider participation by citizenry and facilitate effective service delivery. Ward Development Committees are the mechanism through which the decentralization policy is implemented in Zambia by ensuring that communities at ward level decide their development priorities leading to improved and responsive service delivery. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the effectiveness of Ward Development Committees (WDCs) in the implementation of the decentralization policy in Zambia from 2016-2021. A case study of Chibombo district was adopted because the district was among the few selected to pilot the implementation of the policy in the country. The study was an analysis based on focus group discussions and key informant interviews conducted in four wards in Keembe and Katuba constituencies. Further analysis was based on records from the Council and literature. The study employed multi-stage random sampling and purposive sampling techniques in selection of the sample. Keembe and Katuba constituencies were purposively selected in the first stage. 3 wards in Keembe and 1 ward in Katuba were randomly selected in the second stage. In the third stage, non-probability sampling techniques, specifically convenience sampling for focus group discussion and purposive sampling for the key informants were used. The study revealed that only one study ward was functional during the period under review and enhanced community participation. Operationalisation of most WDCs was poor and could not enhance popular participation. Constraints hindering the work of WDCs were identified which included lack of financial resources, financial irregularities, lack of adherence to guidelines, political affiliation and ethnic considerations, and lack of coordination between the Council and WDCs in the implementation of the decentralisation policy. Recommendations were proffered to government to provide financial support to WDCs intervention programmes to enhance community participation in governance issues and strengthen accountability and transparency mechanisms in Local Authorities.*

**Keywords:** *Decentralisation, Community Participation, Ward Development Committees, Local Government, Governance, Local Development*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Most African countries at independence had an idea of having a strong and centralized government to give vitality and dynamism in shaping the transition from a colonial to an independent state in the governance system. The attainment of independence and the demands for accelerated development after decades of colonial neglect gave rise to rapid expansions of the public services which in turn began to challenge the delivery capacity of the services to the people. Failure to render expected and required services gave birth to failed governments and corruption. This failure by central governments to render required services has seen a shift in public management with paradigm shift in favour of devolution of power (Decentralisation). As a result, the state can no longer be the sole provider of services and other actors must get on board.

Gordon and Christ (2008) therefore point out that in African countries and beyond, there appears nowadays to be a remarkable consensus on the desirability of decentralization, with support coming from international development agencies (donors) and the civil society organisations.

Decentralization entails the transfer or delegation of legal and political authority to plan, make decisions and manage public functions, from central government and its agencies to field organizations of those agencies, subordinate units of government, semi-autonomous public corporations, area-wide or regional development authorities, functional authorities, autonomous local governments, or nongovernmental organizations (Rondinelli, 1981:137).

According to Chikulo (2009), in Zambia, attempts at decentralization began during the colonial era when the British introduced the policy of indirect rule through the Native Authority Ordinance of 1929 when senior chiefs' traditional authority became a native authority and were classified as sub districts. However, the form of decentralization under colonial rule did not meet the aspirations of the indigenous Zambian people. As a result, after gaining independence from colonial rule, successive governments have instituted various local government reforms in trying to enhance decentralization according to democratic standards. This is evidenced by the enactment of the Local Government Act of 1965, Local Administration Act of 1980, Local Government Act of 1991 and the Local Government Act of 2019.

In trying to make decentralization a reality, the Zambia government formulated the National Decentralization Policy of 2002 (revised in 2013) whose aim was to achieve a fully decentralized and democratically elected system of governance characterized by open, predictable, and transparent policy-making and implementation through effective local community participation in decision making, development and administration while maintaining sufficient linkages between the central government and the periphery (Zambia, 2002). The major aspect of the National Decentralization Policy was the government's stated commitment to transfer not only functions to districts but also matching resources. The Policy also highlighted the government's commitment to increased participation of citizens through the creation of sub-district structures.

As a responsive mechanism, the Local Government Act of 2019 provides for the establishment of operational structures at district level. At the helm of the district structure, there is a District council. It is composed of the elected body of councilors, the ex-officio members which are Traditional Authorities (TAs) and Members of Parliament (MPs) from constituencies that are within the local government area. Below the District Council (sub-district level) is the Ward Development Committees (WDC). This committee is composed of elected members from all zones within a ward with deliberate inclusion of representatives for women and other vulnerable categories of people like the youth. Some government departments are also represented. According to the Act, the purpose of the establishment of the WDCs is to;

a) Create a connection between communities and the Council.

b) Ensure that the residents at the local level participate in decision-making.

c) Stimulate and coordinate initiatives for the improvement of livelihood of the local people.

The Act also provides for the establishment of the Village Council (VC) which is represented in a WDC. In this regard, WDCs and VCs are the structures which are supposed to touch the ground because their representations are by both community members and the service providers who are working closely with people at local level. Apart from the above structures, the policy provides for the establishment of a technical committee which supports these structures technically. At the district level, the District Development Coordinating Committee (DDCC) is composed of heads of government departments and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in a district headed by the District Commissioner (DC). The mandate of the committee is to coordinate development programmes in a district.

The importance of involving people in their own development has been recognized world over. The introduction of decentralization as said by Hussein (2004) has generated enthusiasm and great expectation among the local people to take part in decision making particularly in proposing solutions to their development needs. Secondly, it has also raised awareness about bottom-up approach in development especially at district level. The expectation is that decentralization would lead to increased citizen participation hence strengthening local decision making. It would also make government to be more responsive to citizens' needs by enhancing greater economic efficiency in the allocation of goods and services. To achieve this, the decentralization policy was introduced with the Local Government Act NO. 2 of 2019 providing for WDCs as a mechanism for its implementation.

Despite claims that participatory approaches to development improve efficiency and effectiveness and promote processes of democratization and empowerment, there is little evidence about the effectiveness of sub-district structures in ensuring sustainable development and material improvement through decentralization among poor and marginalized people in districts. For example, Zambia remains one of the least developed countries in Africa, with 54% of the population living on less than $1.9 a day and an average life span of 63.5 years (BIT-Zambia Country Report, 2022). The report further indicates that Zambia ranked 143 out of 189 countries in the 2019 Human Development Index, with 48% of the population unable to meet their minimum calorie requirements and more than one-third of children under five stunted. This underlies a steady decline in health care delivery, education, economic growth and general living standards as stated in the report. Rural areas must be the focus of any attempts to tackle this poverty, since these are areas where the majority of the poorest Zambians live. Chikulo (2009) argues that despite the opening up of the political space through the reintroduction of multiparty democracy, citizen participation in the activities of local authorities has remained limited in the Third Republic, due among other reasons, local residents viewing local authorities as unaccountable, untrustworthy and irrelevant to their needs. He points out that wards at the sub-district level are only recognized for purposes of local government elections.

The question could be why is this happening contrary to the decentralization objectives and after establishing structures at all levels to facilitate implementation of the policy? It is not possible to identify the cause of this failure until an investigation on each level's performance is carried out.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of WDCs in the implementation of the Decentralization policy in Chibombo district of Zambia. To achieve it purpose, the paper begins by presenting the theoretical framework guiding the study. It then reviews relevant literature ondecentralization. Thereafter, the paper provides the research methodology, discusses the operationalization of WDCs, the extent to which WDCs enhanced community participation and challenges. Finally, a conclusion is given.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is guided by the Democratic theories of Local Government and Arnstein's ladder of participation theory. According to Democratic theories of Local Government, the provision of public services (especially at district level) can best be done by local administrative structures which may be in a better position to understand the problems of the people at the local level and how best to address those challenges. These theories are in two categories; Centralist and Decentralist theories. Centralist theories (derived from the term centralisation) support or justify the need for the central government to have increased control of matters at the local level. In effect, the advocates of centralist theories support a top-bottom approach in the governance system. They argue that a bias towards local democracy may result in neglect of issues such as territorial, social and economic justice. Further, that due to limited resources at the local level, the central government should play a greater role in the re-allocation of resources at the local level to avoid imbalances in the nation as a whole. However, centralist theories have been criticised for not recognising the importance of the bottom-up approach in the delivery of public services at the local level. On the other hand, Decentalist theories do recognise the strategic position of local self-government in national development. For instance, the Localist theory, in effect argues for effective transfer of power, functions and resources (both human and financial) to the lower levels of governance system in order to facilitate efficiency and effectiveness in public service delivery. The Localist theory is, therefore, oriented towards maximum decentralisation of functions and powers. Supporters of the theory maintain that the local tier is closest to the citizens, and because of this strategic placement, can be more responsive and accountable to the communities. Therefore, the bottom-up approach in the governance system is highly favoured. For these theorists, autonomous local administrative units whose decision-making processes are characterised by popular participation constitute effective channels for the delivery of public services (Lolojih, 2008).Critics of the Localist theory argue that the theory does not take sufficient account of the tension that exist between the regional and national levels. The critics also maintain that the theory does not seem to acknowledge that a bias towards local democracy may result in neglect of issues such as territorial, social and economic justice. Another observation is that the Decentralist theories fail to appreciate that if the limited resources at the local level were not centrally coordinated then the uneven resources of various local units can lead to serious imbalances.

Arnstein's 'ladder' framework has also been deemed appropriate in measuring the degree to which communities have connections to power where participation in developmental activities is concerned. According to Arnstein (1969) citizen participation is a process which demonstrates not only the way in which power is shared but also how those that are marginalised in society are allowed to be involved in the decisions that affect them. It is therefore, a mechanism to allow for the underprivileged to take part in the necessary reforms that can bring about change in their society and to allow them to have a share in the wealth of their community.

In measuring community participation, the various degree in which a community has connections to power were compared to a ladder. Based on this analogy, Arnstein (1969) suggested a framework with three main levels as depicted below.

*Arnstein's ladder of participation*

| | |
|---|---|
| 8. Citizen control- | degree of citizen power |
| 7. Delegated power- | degree of citizen power |
| 6. Partnership- | degree of citizen power |
| 5. Placation- | degree of citizen tokenism |
| 4. Consultation- | degree of citizen tokenism |
| 3. Informing- | degree of citizen tokenism |
| 2. Therapy- | non-participation |
| 1. Manipulation- | non-participation |

**Source:** *Arnstein 1969*

The lowest of all the levels represents a position where no participation takes place at all. After this level, the next levels are characterised by situations wherein those who are marginalised in the society are informed and consulted. Next to those levels are superior degrees which allow community members to be able to influence decisions in various ways through for example, collaboration with those at a higher level of authority. The final level represents the highest position, where the members have power over the decision-making process. In essence, the framework demonstrates the way in which power is redistributed and its significance lies in the standard that is employed in order to make a distinction between those who are at higher position and the ordinary people found at the lowest level of society. At the lower levels, Arnstein (1969) argues that there are certain types of participation that provide an opportunity to the community members to either support or be informed about decisions which, by and large, have already been made. Under such circumstances, community participation becomes temporal and is sometimes only ceremonial. In addition, communities are allowed to participate, for example in developing of programme plans and activities so as to ensure legitimacy, gain support and prevent future criticism or sabotage. However, at the more advanced (ultimate) levels, the kind of participation that takes place can often be seen as potentially empowering. Participation at these levels allows the community the ability to mobilise and transform themselves and ensures that access to resources and services become relatively easier. The theory has been criticised in that first, at conceptual level, Arnstein's notion of participation is both devoid of context and, critically, has no means of making sense of the context in which the ladder is used. Second, in situations when the nature of the issue is highly contested or undefined, Arnstein's ladder provides few insights into how participation might be progressed as a collective process between all of the stakeholders involved.

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature review shows that a lot of work has been done by a number of scholars, especially on decentralization in Zambia in particular and other developing countries. In their study entitled "The role of ward committees in enhancing public participation in Rustenburg municipality: a critical evaluation", Silima and Auriacombe (2013) observe that ward committees form a bridge by facilitating proper communication between the council and the citizens they represent. The findings are significant to this study because they provides insights on the role of ward committees to enhance public participation. Lessons are learnt that there is need for an enabling environment for the effective functioning of local government and more specifically ward committees. Further that, ward committees should be seen as the core of a democratic and accountable government. However, the study focuses on the role of ward committees and how they enhance public participation in an urban

municipality of Rusteinburg in South Africa. The study does not for instance, provide further analysis of the challenges encountered by ward committees as they carry out their duties. The fact that the study was done in a particular environment, there could have been social, economic and political factors at play. This study attempted to cover up that gap and having been carried out in a rural setting of Chibombo district in Zambia.

Lessons are drawn from related studies carried out by Solomon (2007), Lubaale et al (2007), Omolo (2010) and, Oyugi and Kibua (2008) on Decentralisation and devolution in Kenya. The findings from the studies are of importance to this study because they reveal that there is need to put up mechanisms for effective implementation of decentralization. Further, lessons are drawn from the studies with regards to the observation that if properly established, local government structures enhance community participation in developmental projects. Consequently, the studies have made a contribution in terms of directing our study on issues which needed to be investigated. However, limitations to the findings are that the studies just give a general overview of mechanisms put in place to enhance decentralization in Kenya. Further, the studies do not provide critical analysis of the operations of specific ward committees and problems associated with such local government structures in different localities.

Commenting on Local Government reforms in Zambia, Chikulo (2009) gives an overview of the efforts of successive Zambian governments to transform and institutionalize local government. In his paper, Chikulo provides an overview of the reforms implemented in four phases between 1964 and 2008(Phase I: 1964-1970, Phase II: 1971-1979, Phase III: 1980-1990 and 1991-2008). Chikulo's commentaries are of great interest to this study because they show how local government reforms in Zambia have brought about significant changes in policy frameworks and institutional structures in order to facilitate and anchor effective delivery of socio-economic development services. Notable in his commentaries is his observation that the strength of decentalised local governance remains limited due to a number of challenges local authorities are faced with. Another observation of great relevance to this study is that for effective and efficient delivery of services, democratically decentralized local governance need adequate resources. However, the generality of Chikulo's (2009) work on reforms on local government in Zambia makes it substantially different from my case study approach and my emphasis on the effectiveness of specific sub-district structures like WDCs and challenges associated with their operations.

Lessons can be drawn from a study carried out in Ogun State of Nigeria on the role and challenges of Ward Development Committees (WDCs) in promoting grassroots health awareness by Azu (2017. The findings from the above literature are of great significance to this study because they show how WDCs can be operationalized at local level in order to enhance community participation. Further, there are lessons from the findings on various challenges which affect the functionality of WDCs especially in rural settings. Nonetheless, the studies focused on operationalization of WDCs specifically in the provision of health services at the local level. In addition, the studies were done in a different context since even if Nigeria is a developing African country like Zambia, it may have different political, social and economic environments.

## 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was guided by a qualitative design. In employing a qualitative research approach, the study embraced a case study strategy. Qualitative research was adopted in order to have an in depth understanding of the issues under investigation

Both secondary and primary data were collected. Secondary data consisted of documented data on related studies conducted in Zambia and other parts of the world. The documents included textbooks, journal articles, working papers, research reports, conference papers, workshop papers, seminar papers, dissertations, and theses. These documents were obtained from individuals, libraries, and the internet. Primary data, on the other hand, was qualitative. This data was collected from the local people through focus group discussions. Data from the key informants was collected using unstructured interviews (interview guides). These included; selected officials from the Chibombo District Council, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Church organisations, and the royal establishment.

The study population included community members, former members of WDCs, community leaders (i.e. traditional rulers of the communities, ward councilors), representatives of church organisations, NGOs and officials from District Administration and the Council. The study was an analysis based on focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

The study employed multi-stage sampling technique in the selection of the sample. Keembe and Katuba constituencies were purposively selected in the first stage. In the second stage, all the wards in the two constituencies were included in the sampling frame and four were randomly selected. Out of the four randomly selected wards, 38 respondents were selected and put into two categories. The first category consisted of 10 key informants who were selected through purposive sampling. The key informants included officials from District Administration and the Council, representatives for NGOs, Churches and the Royal Establishment. The second category consisted of respondents who were involved in focus group discussions. These were 28 in total and they were purposively selected and each group consisted of 7 respondents.

Data was analyzed using content analysis. This involved grouping information into themes. The study used the method of content analysis to analyze data because it is the most appropriate method considering that some data were in text form.

The study was conducted according to standard ethical guidelines. This was done by seeking clearance from the University Ethics Committee. At district level, clearance was sought from the District Administration before collection of data. Consent was also sought from all the respondents before data was collected.

## 5. OPERATIONALISATION OF WDCS WITH REGARDS TO DECENTRALISATION POLICY

The study established that at central government level, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development coordinates the implementation of decentralization policy in the country and it was through the Ministry that Chibombo among other districts was identified as a pilot for the implementation of the policy in the country. The councils are the first devolved elements in the structure of coordinating the implementation of the decentralization. They are placed at the center of activities facilitating collaboration of all stakeholders in the proper execution of the policy. In other words, Councils are the backbone of proper implementation of decentralization.

The Ward Development Committee (WDC) is the first point of contact between the council and community residents. The establishment of WDC as a mechanism for implementing the decentralization policy is provided for under Article 148 of the Constitution of Zambia and the Local Government Act No. 2 of 2019. The decentralization policy further emphasizes that in order to enhance inclusive governance which will promote sustainable development, the government shall put in place mechanisms at provincial, district and sub-district levels. The legal framework and the policy provide for the establishment of WDC in each ward at sub-district level. Further, there is a provision of the Village Council (VC) which shall be represented in the WDC. Guidelines are also given in terms of the composition and functions of WDCs. For instance, the composition of a WDC should include all elected zone members, ward councilor, representatives of marginalized groups like women, youth and the disabled, representatives of government departments which usually provide extension services, representatives of NGOs operating in the district and a traditional leader.

The study revealed that during the period under review, WDCs were set up in all wards in the district according to the guidelines, though the process was delayed by the central government. Further, the findings were that not all the wards under study had WDCs established according to the guidelines. This is because in some wards, marginalized groups like women and the disabled were not included as members of WDCs as was the case with Chibombo central ward. A related study by Oko et al (2017) show similar results where the composition of WDCs was lopsided because of political considerations and patronage become factors in the choice of WDC members. Non-conformity to guidelines was as a result of some ward councilors who hand-picked certain individuals of their choice to be members of WDCs. This was stated by one of the key informants who had this to say:

"*Some councilors decide on their own to include their relatives and friends as members of WDCs and this practice discourages community members to participate in developmental activities. Traditional leaders are not considered as well. [Key informant, traditional leader from Chibombo central ward]*".

It was also observed that most of the wards in the study area were not effectively operationalized except for Chunga ward. This could be attributed to the fact that guidelines on the establishment of WDCs were not followed. The fact that membership in most WDCs was not inclusive, you do not expect community members to work with the established sub-district structures as was the case in most study wards. These findings also reflect the power relationship between the community (weak) and the authority (strong). To adopt this kind of 'induced' form of participation means that communities only accept ideas on local development that have been developed for them by authorities instead of the members developing these ideas by themselves. This is contrary to the tenets of decentralization which emphasizes on democratic principles to be upheld. In addition, the findings were that there was lack of monitoring the implementation of the policy after the establishment of structures at sub-district level. This was stated by two participants.

*"The only problem is that after sensitization meetings by the council, there was no further monitoring of the functionality of WDCs, both by the Council and District administration [Key informant, Chiefs and Traditional Affairs Officer under District Administration]".*

*"The major problem which negatively affected the operations of WDCs was lack of finances. The council could not monitor the activities of WDCs due to financial constraints [Key informant, Council Official from Chibombo district council]".*

The guidelines are that activities of WDCs should be implemented through constituted Finance and Planning, Infrastructure Development, and Socio-Economic sub-committees. Despite the legal provision of Sub-WDC committees, the study revealed that none of the wards had the sub-committees in place; instead, the activities to be undertaken through Sub-WDC committees were handled directly by the WDC. The other observation was that the submissions on projects proposed in the wards should originate from the communities through the village development committees. However, it was established that the existence of the village committee was only present in one ward out of the four involved in the study. It can be argued that the lack of coordination and non-involvement of community structures made WDCs not to function effectively.

The general feeling from focus group discussions was that majority of WDCs did not operate according to the expectations during the period under review. Participants observed great enthusiasm during some of activities like immunization mobilization and health promotion programmes. The drawn out theme was that any programme that involved distribution of items witnessed greater activity by WDCs. Among the reasons given for ineffective operationalization of WDCs include politicization of the process of establishing the WDCs, exclusion of marginalized groups like women, lack of incentives for WDC members and weak link between the Council and WDCs.

As can be deduced from the preceding discussion, establishment of WDCs for effective implementation of the decentralization policy in the district was effected but eventually guidelines on how to operationalize them were not followed by most of the wards. Consequently, most of the WDCs became non-functional and as a result, community participation was not enhanced as will be discussed in the following section.

## 6. WDCS AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

The study revealed that lack of functional WDCs in most study wards as discussed in the previous section, implied that community participation as envisioned was difficult to implement leading to the loss of the associated benefits to the respective communities. The responses from focus group discussions were of mixed reactions, with the minority of respondents indicating in the affirmative that communities were involved in developmental activities by WDCs. It was observed that some level of participation was recorded in study wards where WDCs were functional like Chunga ward. Most of the respondents in Chunga ward acknowledged that the WDC successfully created linkages between their community and the council. The findings were that it was through the WDC that the local people were able to discuss their needs on several development activities and made recommendations to the council. For instance, they attributed the successes recorded in the ward such as the construction of a Police Station and Mothers Shelter to the link created through WDCs. A study by Azu (2017) show similar results where WDCs are engaged in promoting immunization programmes, health education, water and sanitation projects with government agencies and NGOs.

The other success story was recorded in Chikobo ward of Keembe Constituency where the construction of classroom blocks was done as a joint effort with Plan International. The community contributed manpower and local building materials which were required for the project. However, there was a general feeling by respondents that WDC did not do much in involving the community members in projects because even in the case of the classroom block, participation in the project was induced by incentives which were provided by the development agency. In addition, other respondents argued that the linkage was weakened by a lack of action on agreed issues between the councilor and the community. As the case was in one project where the councilor organized the residents to contribute funds towards repair works on the road. The road was not done and money went unaccounted for.

The disparities in the successes recorded in the study wards could be attributed to two major factors; revenue base and leadership. For instance, Chunga ward is located in Katuba constituency which is near Lusaka city and characterized by a lot of economic activities than all the wards in the study area. As a result, it has a wider revenue base which makes it possible for the WDC to function effectively. Even in terms of leadership, the ward had a councilor who provided the much-needed leadership and managed to engage the community members in various development activities. One Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participant had this to say:

*"The councilor could use his resources to mobilize people for meetings to discuss the developmental activities to be carried out in the ward…"*

However, majority of key informants and participants in focus group discussions in study wards mentioned that community participation was limited in most of the wards during the period under review. The general view was that, despite the fact that some communities were involved in local governance, the level of involvement leaves much to be desired. For most of the members, the participation by the community has been the reaction to the programme implementers like the Council would like them to do. This was reflected in most of the arguments put forward by the majority of those who voiced out their opinions during interviews and focus group discussions. For example, one participant made the following statement;

*"Council officials always come to tell us what they intend to do but how they arrived at such decisions is not something we have any means to know [Key informant from Ipongo ward: Former WDC member]".*

According to WHO (2002), community participation is understood as a process by which people are enabled to become actively and genuinely involved in defining the issues of concern to them in making decisions about factors that affect their lives, in formulating and implementing policies, in planning, developing and delivering services and in taking action to achieve change. In other words, people are supposed to be involved from the earliest stage of development process as opposed to simply asking their opinion on project proposals that have been developed, or for their contributions to the implementation of projects imposed from outside. The revelations of the study is that participation was mostly when there were community meetings for sensitization programmes like immunization or when community members were being informed about a particular programme to be implemented by government. In other words, the local people were mere recipients of services

One of the community members had this to say on community participation:

*"It was difficult for community members to be involved in most developmental programmes because people were usually called for meetings just to be told about a programme which had already been planned without any input from the locals. For instance, procurement of building materials was done by the Council officials without consulting the local people through WDCs [Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Participant: Former WDC member]"*

From the context of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation framework, such participation can be regarded as tokenistic and the highest quality of participation is at consultation levels. This only guarantees the provision of information and consultation on issues and it neither leads to community empowerment nor ensures direct incorporation of inputs from the communities into local governance issues and policy-making process. This implies that the communities are only used as tools (means)

for achieving policy goals rather than being the actual decision makers (an end) regarding their local problems. In effect, participation by the communities could be deemed merely ceremonial noting that most programmes still bore all features of a top-bottom system of decision-making.

The study further revealed that the extent of community participation in local governance was affected by a combination of factors. As mentioned earlier, the non-existence of WDCs in most wards affected community participation to a great extent since there were no platforms from which the local people could make decisions on matters that affect their lives. In a related study which was done by Oko et al (2017) in Ebonyi State in Nigeria show similar results where lack of WDCs in majority of wards led to non-participation by community members in most local governance programmes. Perhaps amongst the most critical factors that affected community participation in local governance from the beginning was the inconsistency and delay in the formation of WDCs in the district. One of the Council officials pointed out that the process of forming WDCs had begun but was later halted following directives from Central government and later re-authorized in an uncoordinated manner. This in itself demotivated the community members to fully get interested in community developmental activities.

The study also revealed that community participation in local governance was also negatively affected by lack of coordination between councils and WDCs. It was established that in most instances, the Council did not engage WDCs before implementation of programmes. This was pointed out by one key informant who had this to say:

*"The council did not involve the WDCs and communities in the decisions they made, especially in identifying which project to implement. Also, the communication between the zonal representatives and the traditional leaders was bad [Key informant from Chikobo ward: traditional leader]"*

This lack of community involvement in the identification of projects affected their implementation as was noted in Chibombo central where a hummer mill was abandoned because the project was identified without consulting the community.

The attitude of the Council workers was also cited as one of the reasons majority of community members were discouraged to participate in governance issues in their respective wards. Most of participants in the focus group discussions and respondents in the interviews in all the selected wards in the study area agreed that Council workers were not responsive enough to the needs of the people. As a result, the local people were not willing in most of the time to get involved in local governance issues.

The other observation was on the community members' dissatisfaction with the composition of the WDCs as discussed earlier. The composition of the WDC membership in the wards did not conform to the guidelines stipulated in the policy and as provided by the legal framework as it was lopsided. For instance, some WDCs had no representatives for marginalized groups like women, youth and the disabled. Other WDCs lacked representatives from government departments which offer extension services like Community Development and Agriculture. Political considerations and patronage became a factor in the choice of WDC members. The abrupt stoppage and reinstatement of WDC formation led to some wards having membership which exhibited party affiliations. This practice, negatively affected the participation of communities in local governance. These findings are similar to the findings by Oko et al (2017) in their study in Ebonyi State in Nigeria where political and ethnicity issues influenced the choice of WDC members.

The above findings were confirmed by one key informant from a development agency who argued that community engagement was done but certain members of the community shunned activities superintended over by people from either a different tribe or political affiliation which in turn affected the rate at which development occurred in the area. The above arguments suggest that despite the fact that there was establishment of governance structures at sub-district level, they were politicized, the practice which is detrimental to development.

Community participation was also affected by factors internal to the functioning of WDCs. For instance, certain wards had their participation negatively affected by the executive committee and members of WDC's expectancy of remuneration. On the other hand, the ward that recorded higher community participation in governance can be attributed to the proper functioning of the WDC,

especially the executive committee. For instance, Chunga ward which scored highly on community participation attributed the success largely to the leadership provided by the councilor who was also the chairperson of the WDC. Similar sentiments were shared in Ipongo ward where some successes were mentioned in community participation, particularly in areas of health and education. Interestingly, increased participation was recorded when it came to health and education programmes because WDC members were usually given incentives for mobilizing the communities for programmes such as immunization.

This brings us to another study revelation that the functionality of WDCs influenced the level of community participation. Several factors were identified which affected the functionality of WDCs. Among the factors identified included; poor understanding of the role of WDCs by community members, transport difficulties experienced by WDC members in carrying out their duty, lack of allowances and community members' poor understanding of their role in enhancing the functions of the WDCs. Other factors included; lopsided composition of the WDC membership, WDC members' perception that they are to discharge their functions from their home at their convenience, lack of respect for members of the WDC by the community members, and lack of work plans by the WDCs. These factors were uniformly identified in all study wards and people interviewed. For instance, concerning incentives for WDC members, one participant of FGD in Ipongo ward had this to say:

"*Most of the work done by WDC members is done on voluntary basis because there are no remunerations involved; as a result, some of them decide to withdraw their membership. That is why you find that most of WDCs even fail to mobilise communities*"

Studies by Ezinwa (2017) and Oko et al (2017), have also demonstrated that attrition of WDC members is a major problem associated with sustenance of their work done.

FGD participants in Chikobo ward argued that WDCs would provide a good platform for community participation in local governance if well utilized. However, this did not happen in their ward as the councilor rarely engaged the people as meetings were infrequently held. The traditional leader in the ward also bemoaned the lack of community involvement in the decisions made by the council. The traditional leader said:

"*The council did not involve the community in the decisions they made, especially in identifying which project to implement. Also, the communication between the zonal representatives and the traditional leaders was bad…*"

This view was upheld by residents of Chibombo central who also indicated that the WDCs in their previous form did not encourage resident participation in governance issues as this was eminent in the lack of community involvement in project identification. According to the ward councilor, this can be attributed to the lack of coordination between the councils and the WDCs during the period under review. However, the scenario seems to have changed in the new administration with the council facilitating the establishment of WDCs by coordinating elections of ward representatives in all the six (6) zones which has spurred the interest of ward residents to participate in governance issues.

The preceding arguments confirm that the outcome of most WDC programme activities did not represent the views of all those who are supposed to be involved. The general picture that one can get from these arguments is that when it comes to development processes, the inclusion of community members' priorities, as well as the chances to explore the cultural significance of their views, was lacking. Such limited participation by the communities can lead to the neglect of important sources of lay knowledge particularly to local decisions. This raises a question as to whether community participation in governance issues at the local level is a means or an end. From the above analysis, it is fair to say that the community participation in governance issues may be described aptly as a tool for the attainment of the needed goal of authorities through the use of community's own resources (a means). This is in contrast with having communities themselves becoming more involved in developing their own capabilities in order to achieve the desired goals (an end) without being dictated to by the authorities.

## 7. CHALLENGES

### 7.1. Lack of Adherence to Terms of Reference/Guidelines

Article 148 of the constitution of Zambia and the Local Government Act No. 2 of 2019 provide for the establishment of WDCs and guides on the composition of a committee and its functions. The guidelines are that WDCs should comprise of; elected zonal representatives, representative of government departments which provide extension services (agriculture, community development etc.), NGO representative, representatives of marginalized groups (women, youth and disabled), Chief representative, Ward councilor, trustee from the local authority, and gender focal point person as ex-officio.

However, the study revealed that the composition of the WDCs in study wards did not conform to the guidelines as most of them, had any of the representatives from government departments and marginalized groups like the disabled and women. Most study wards cited lack of clarity on how the composition was arrived at, with some indicating that members were just handpicked by councilors and not elected as in the case of zonal representatives. One participant from FGD in Ipongo ward had this to say:

*"The only problem was that councilors from the dominant party influenced the membership of the WDCS. That behavior by councilors discouraged other members who later withdrew their membership"*

Similar findings have been reported in other countries like in South Africa. In her study on the role of Ward Committees in citizen participation and the socio-economic development of communities, Auriacombe (2013) argues that one of the most difficult problems the election of ward committee members poses is that there are many interest groups that could form part of a local government structure. The composition of WDCs was lopsided because the Council seemed to operate in isolation when it came to the implementation of the decentralization policy and monitoring of the operations of the WDCs was not done. Even when it came to working with other structures, there was little or no consultation of other stakeholders at district level. Therefore, it can be argued that non conformity with guidelines made WDCs not to be effective as the community members were not represented enough and consequently, it was difficult to enhance community participation in governance issues.

### 7.2. Financial Irregularities

According to the guidelines, the WDCs are required to collect revenue and that out of the total revenue collected, 10% of it should be given to the respective WDC. However, the Council did not follow the guidelines as it did not remit the 10% of the collected revenue to the WDCs. Such arbitrary behavior by the Council compromised the functionality of WDCs as lack of financial resources was identified as a major constraint across study wards. Irregularities were also observed in the area of procurement. The guidelines are that in any procurement of goods and services, there must be authorized signatories both from the Council and WDC. However, study findings were that this provision was in most cases ignored and money was withdrawn by the council without the signatories from WDCs. A case for procurement irregularities was a school project in Chikobo ward whose budget was formulated in a collaborated effort between the Council and the WDC but when it came to execution, the Council inflated the figures without the knowledge of the WDC. The practice weakened relations between the Local Authority and WDCs as there was a lot of mistrust in the operations of the Council.

### 7.3. Lack of Financial Resources

The most outstanding challenge cited in all study wards was the financial constraint which affected the functionality of the WDCs. Despite the provision of the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) which various wards could apply for to implement their developmental activities, the fund was not enough as it was faced with competing needs from the wards, varying in complexity and amounts required. For instance, the CDF allocation was 1.6 million for each constituency which in the case of Keembe constituency, such an amount was to be shared among 21 wards. This lack of adequate resources affected the ability of most wards to implement their programs. Chunga ward was an

exception due to its wide revenue base as was mentioned earlier. Chikulo (2009) argues that this lack of resources in local government has left significant gaps in service delivery capacity and placed limitations on the extent to which stakeholders can participate in development management.

### 7.4. Political Affiliation and Tribal Sentiments

The study revelations were that activities of WDCs were hampered by political party affiliations and tribal sentiments. Respondents indicated that most WDC activities were carried out on political party lines. A respondent of Chibombo central ward was quoted having said;

*"The WDCs only took development where they thought they had more members of the ruling party…"*

The political and tribal sentiments also affected WDC operations as some community members did not want to participate in WDC activities either because of the party affiliation of the person chairing the meeting or their tribe. The observation was that politics influenced the operations of WDCs because most councilors belonged to the opposition party and that did not sit well with those belonging to the ruling party. In Chikobo ward this was validated by a neutral party, the key informant from a development agency who had this to say:

*"Certain community members shunned community activities that were superintended over by people from either different tribe or political affiliation, this affected the rate at which development occurred in the area…"*

Chikulo (2009) gives a related observation in his commentaries on the 1980 reforms in Zambia. He observes that the reforms did not achieve the decentralization objectives due to among other reasons, the politicization of the administrative apparatus, centralized decision making and democratic local governance was undermined at the local level, as the party representatives were not elected by universal adult suffrage.

The general feeling from the community members was that politics and ethnicity considerations negatively affected most of development programmes in the study area. Even when it came to identification of beneficiaries of particular programmes or projects, the exercise was done according to political party lines. It can be argued that because of political and ethnicity considerations being involved in local governance issues, the community members detached themselves from WDCs and that made WDC being irrelevant as conduits of the implementation of the Decentralisation policy.

### 7.5. Lack of Collaboration among District Leaders

Most of the respondents from study wards noted with concern the lack of collaboration among political leaders in their wards. For instance, In Chikobo ward, the respondents cited the lack of cooperation between the former ward councilor and the area Member of Parliament which they strongly felt contributed largely to the inability of the WDCs to function properly. This lack of collaboration between political and civic leaders seems to have been an offshoot of different political party affiliations discussed above. There were similar findings in Ipongo and Chibombo Central wards that the lack of collaboration was not only between councilors and Members of parliament but also between Councilors and District Commissioner who is the chairperson of District Development Coordinating Committee (DDCC). As discussed earlier, the problem was as result of political dynamics in the district where the majority of councilors belonged to the opposition party and the District Commissioner was a political appointee from the ruling party. The implication is that the lack of collaboration among district leaders greatly affected the potential of development that can be achieved through decentralization.

### 8. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that there were legal and policy provisions for the establishment of WDCs and during the period under review, WDCs were constituted in all wards in the study area. However, it was established that eventually, most of the WDCs became non-functional due to a number of challenges. The fact that WDCs were not functional in most of the wards, community participation could not be enhanced. Among the identified challenges which hindered WDCs to be functional included non-conformity to the guidelines, political and ethnic considerations in the running of WDCs, financial irregularities, financial constraints and lack of collaboration among district leaders.

All these challenges made WDCs not to be effective in the implementation of the decentralization policy. It can be argued that although local government reforms have brought about significant policy frameworks and institutional structures in order to facilitate and anchor effective delivery of socio-economic development services, governance structures at district and sub-district levels are faced with difficult challenges. Resultantly, community members find it difficult to be involved in various local governance issues, hence, non-achievement of the decentralization policy. More research is needed on the performance of WDCs especially with the increased CDF allocation after the political transition in 2021 since the new Administration has its own policy reforms on local government.

## 9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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