POLITICS ASIDE:
PURSUING DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE'S BIGGEST SLUM

"The economic situation in Zimbabwe is not very conducive to building good relationships between those in office and those expecting services," says Kizito Muhomba, Secretary of the Local Board of Epworth, a peri-urban area on the outskirts of Harare and the site of the country's largest informal settlement.

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PIONEERS OF PARTICIPATION
CASE STUDY

Amid social unrest, political instability and hyperinflation, the Zimbabwean economy has shrunk for ten straight years (1999-2008), and with it, the government's ability to provide education, water, sewerage, roads and other basic necessities.

The crisis was heightened when electoral authorities in 2008 announced that the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) had not won enough votes to avoid a run-off in the presidential elections. Denouncing the run-off as a "violent sham," opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai withdrew from the election, leaving incumbent President Robert Mugabe uncontested. Many foreign nations condemned the process and tightened sanctions against the country's leaders. The official inflation rate rose above 100,000 percent that year.

Early the following year, in a negotiation efforts led by South Africa, incumbent Robert Mugabe and opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai singed a power-sharing agreement that left Mugabe as President and made Tsvangirai Prime Minister. Later that year, with no funds to pay health workers, and struck by a cholera epidemic, Zimbabwe declared a national emergency.

Though the cholera epidemic and hyperinflation have since been contained, the unity government has been beleaguered by in-fighting between Mugabe and Tsvangirai and their respective parties: the Zimbabwe African National Front-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the MDC. The distrust and anger created by the political situation continues to fuel local violence. In this context, local participation requires a special brand of leadership.

Informal settlements and formal politics

During Zimbabwe's long War of Liberation against white-minority rule, thousands of displaced people settled in Epworth, which was then the site of a Methodist Church Mission. With the influx unabated, even after the end of the conflict in 1980, the Methodist Church later ceded the land to the government.

Kizito, whose job is comparable to city manager in Epworth, estimates Epworth's population is now 300,000, about 70 percent of which have settled informally: with no title to the land. Epworth grew so quickly and with so little planning, that much of the area still lacks basic infrastructure such as water, sewerage and roads. The informal dwellings themselves are often precariously constructed.

In 1986, a local board of commissioners - the equivalent of a municipal council - was appointed with two mandates: to facilitate the registration of land titles and to promote the local economy. Formalizing land titles in Epworth, however, posed a threat to the use of empty plots for grazing by many residents. Many of the informal settlers hence refused to cooperate with the local board and even opposed the proposal to hold local elections.

In an attempt to break the deadlock and to facilitate dialogue between the board and residents, Ward Development Committees were established, one in each of Epworth's seven wards. Residents were asked to appoint locally respected individuals to the committee. Ward Committees are not provided for in the Zimbabwean legal framework for urban local government, so the decision veered Epworth into slightly uncharted territory. The arrangement seemed ideal at the time in the absence of elected councillors, but because development committee members had no legal power, their input was by and large ignored (often only taken into account where it was not in variance with council's position).

> *"We are talking about poor people, and when a poor person enters the office, the impression you might have about them is negative. You might not listen."*

The relationship was further strained when elections for board councillors were eventually held for the first time in 2008, giving control of the board to the MDC. Ward Committees, on the other hand, were almost all in the hands of Zanu-PF supporters. Both sides refused to even meet, Kizito recalls. Complicating matters, financial transfers from central government - which finance most of local spending on infrastructural development - stopped coming three years ago.

Bridging the divide

Kizito took the first step to ending the impasse. He went to each of the wards to explain the situation. All but one of the wards responded by selecting a more politically balanced ward committee. The one ward that refused to shuffle its committee was Ward 7, also known in Shona as *Gada*, which translates as 'free rider' - the ward where informal settlements are concentrated.

Another challenge to the relationship between the local board councillors and the communities was the attitude toward the poor. Kizito worked to communicate the position of the settlers as fairly and accurately as possible to the board councillors.

Communication between the board council and the committees was eventually re-established, but Epworth still had no funds to carry out a significant programme of formalization of the housing. Kizito turned to Dialogue on Shelter for the Homeless, the technical partner of the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation, a network of community savings schemes made up of households living in poor urban communities across the country.

In the current climate in Zimbabwe, it's easy to get branded as a political conspirator, and any objection from the provincial, district or local authorities can prevent a civil society organization from operating in a community, so the Homeless People's Federation makes great efforts to remain politically neutral. At its meetings, no political banners, slogans or t-shirts are allowed.

Such policies have earned the organization trust in Epworth's Ward 7, but the process has been gradual, and facilitated in part by Kizito. According to one Federation activist, Kizito helped to organize community meetings when the Federation began to recruit members in the area. Civil society is returning the favour now.

Dialogue for the Homeless first helped Epworth to carry out a topographical survey of the area, and it is carrying out an enumeration exercise that is crucial to planning. The cooperation is opening the possibility for the long-postponed formalization of the settlements.

Residents have long been reluctant to contribute taxes to fund neighbourhood improvements, but through the Federation's savings schemes, which are managed transparently by members, communities have begun to pay for their own roads and pipes. Some residents have become more open to the idea of formalizing.

The procedure of formalization has also become easier after Epworth granted permission for members of the Federation to use their savings booklets as a valid identification to register on the waiting list for plots.

It takes two

Huge infrastructural challenges remain in Epworth, and political acrimony continues to trouble the relationship between the Epworth board council and ward committees. Still, given the constraints, the progress has been remarkable.

Much of the credit is owed to the presence of a pioneer within the local authority who was able to win enough trust to broker a dialogue among the various stakeholders: the board councillors, the ward committees and civil society leaders.

The Epworth board council, however, would have equally been powerless without the capabilities of the Homeless People's Federation and Dialogue on Shelter for the Homeless. Their community-based development approach gave residents the confidence to engage with formalization projects as they set their own agenda for development.

Epworth, like so many of the other cases, reiterates the need for pioneers on both sides of the government-public divide.

Contact

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