



BARRIERS TO THE PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN RURAL LOCAL GOVERNANCE: THE CASE OF BIKITA DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT: *The paper was qualitative and inductive through the interpretivist's paradigm. It sought to access the barriers to the participation of persons with disabilities (PwDs) in Bikita's local governance in Zimbabwe. Data collection was through key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FDGs) and observations. The KIIs targeted the chiefs, headman, councillors, state actors and Zimbabwe's Association for the Visually Handicapped whereas the FDGs included the disabled and the non-disabled. The sampling was purposive. The human rights-based approach as espoused in the critical disability theory framed the empirical. The paper unearthed that Bikita Rural District Council structures were not disability inclusive. PwDs were marginalised in local governance/development processes. This led to higher incidences of abject poverty. The paper charged that the lack of inclusivity is in itself discriminatory. It argued that the drive towards inclusivity should include inter alia disability-mainstreaming, provision of disability-accessible information and disability awareness campaigns.*

KEYWORDS: Disability, disability inclusion, barriers, participation, local governance.



INTRODUCTION

Local governance in Zimbabwe dates back to the 1890s when the colonial administration of the day, the British South African Company (BSAC), established the first formal local authority, the Salisbury Sanitary Board, to administer local affairs (Mapuva, 2019). Local government was not provided for in the constitution but became a creature of statute which meant that the local government system did not have constitutional protection (ibid). Subsequent local government instruments and institutions such as municipal ordinances, as well as advisory boards and councils, were established and all fell under the direct control of the District Commissioner who sought to reinforce colonial policy in African townships (Machingauta, 2010). The centrally-defined local governance institutions and structures were instituted to deny Africans self-government (ibid). In response to this repressive dispensation, residents, mostly from urban areas, resisted the entrenched racial, legal and institutional frameworks (Mapuva, 2019). The centralised local government system imposed substandard and centrally-defined programmes on African and Native Councils and ‘laid the foundation for a highly centralised post-colonial local governance system that was inherited at independence in 1980’ (ibid).

In colonial times, civil society in Zimbabwe operated clandestinely as civic organisations, social associations, labour movements and social clubs. It took the form of passive resistance against colonial rule (Mapuva, 2019). From the early 1900s, the majority of these associations had their social and cultural roots in rural and migrant labour communities and included religious groups (ibid). With the advent of greater industrialisation and urbanisation in the 1940s and 1950s, township residents' associations emerged to challenge the white economic and political order. The increasing number of workers in urban areas during and immediately after the Second World War, coupled with the growing labour crisis of labour reproduction in urban and rural areas, led to the growth of trade unions whose organisational strength was unprecedented (Moyo *et al.*, 2000).

According to Moyo *et al.* (2000), the mode of colonial rule criminalised politics in African communities and sought to restrict black communities to the realm of tribal existence “... where they would identify themselves in terms of ethnic as opposed to national identities” (p22). Mamdani (1996), on the other hand, argues that colonial rule developed two centres of power that account for the weakness of African societies—urban and rural power. Mamdani further maintains that while urban power spoke the language of civil society and civil rights, rural power under customary tradition authority was concerned with community and the enforcement of tradition. This, according to Mamdani contributed to the weakening of civil society through the political tribalisation of associational life and the difficulties of developing rural-urban linkages in citizen participation. At independence in 1980, Moyo *et al.* (2000) pointed out that the new democratic dispensation was faced with the task of introducing political structures that would accommodate previously marginalised dissenting voices.

The post-colonial reforms to the local government system culminated in the amalgamation of African Councils into District and Urban Councils governed by a new set of legislation, namely the Rural District Councils Act 9 and the Urban Councils Act 10 (Mapuva, 2019). In District Councils, a consolidated set of legislative frameworks has been used to govern the conduct of district council operations, ranging from appointments to the election of council officials as well as revenue collection and service delivery (ibid). In addition, this legislation governs how the infrastructure should be developed.



Between 1980 and 1990, most civic participation in local governance issues in Zimbabwe came through the establishment of ward committees (Mapuva, 2019). Simultaneously, in rural areas, village development committees (VIDCOs) and partisan cells or village units would feed into the ward development committee agenda setting out needs and prioritising them (ibid). Councillors would bring minutes of ward development committees to the Town Clerk who would put issues raised by the wards onto the council agenda for discussion. Councillors would also feedback to their wards through these ward development committee meetings. Thus, civic participation has been put within partisan structures which are hierarchical from the grassroots.

However, it should be noted that the new post-colonial dispensation did not seek to loosen the central government's stranglehold on local authorities but, rather, perpetuated its dominance over local councils by empowering the Minister of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development (MLGRUD) to provide strict monitoring mechanisms for local councils, both in rural and urban areas (Chikerema, 2013). Consequently, the post-colonial political establishment is often blamed for failing to redress the centralisation of powers by the central government and to democratise local government (ibid). What appears to have been misconstrued by many people in Zimbabwe is the fact that the governing legal and institutional framework of local governance in the country provides an opportunity for the responsible Minister to legally enable or disable local authority administration (Murimoga and Musingafi, 2014). Despite the reforms in local governance during the post-colonial period, nothing was done to mainstream disability inclusion.

Problem Statement

Political participation is fundamental to any democratic society (Vráblíková, 2017). In other words, the participation of all people including Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in local governance and development is integral in any society. The right to participate in public and political life (governance) is well-rooted in human rights law and international agreements, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (McVeigh *et al*, 2021). Even though disability prevalence in Zimbabwe stands at 9.3%, decision-making mechanisms have traditionally excluded PwDs and organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs/DPOs), failing to consult with them on the development, implementation, and monitoring of decisions that impact their daily lives (ibid). In Zimbabwe, PwDs lack participation in local governance due to several barriers. PwDs lack representation in council and other community governance structures such as Village Development Committees (VIDCO) and Ward Development Committees (WDCO). Without representation in the community governance structures, PwDs are excluded from decision-making and community development projects/programmes. Consequently, the plight of PwDs continues to worsen as demonstrated by serious poverty.

Purpose of the Study

The paper assessed the barriers to the participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita. It interrogated the relevance of the human rights-based approach espoused in the critical disability theory. This is against a background of limited available research on disability and participation in local governance.

Main Research Objective

To analyse the barriers to the participation of PwDs in local governance in the Bikita district.

Sub-Research Objectives

- a) To examine the structure of the local governance system of Bikita district.
- b) To assess the level of participation of PwDs in Bikita's local governance structures.
- c) To analyse the barriers hindering the participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita.
- d) To examine the impact of the barriers to the participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita

Bikita is one of the seven districts in Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe. It borders with Gutu District, Zaka, Chipinge, Chiredzi, and Mwenezi District(s) (see Figure 1 below). It is located 86 kilometres east of Masvingo on the Masvingo to Birchenough Bridge highway. Its administration is centred at Nyika Growth Point. The district covers an area of 5286 square kilometres and is made up of 32 wards with a total population of 176,835 (80,844 males and 95,991 females) (Zimstat, 2022). The main average population per ward in the communal areas is 5526. Bikita district is also known for lithium mining and the district is reputed to have the largest reserve of petalite in the world

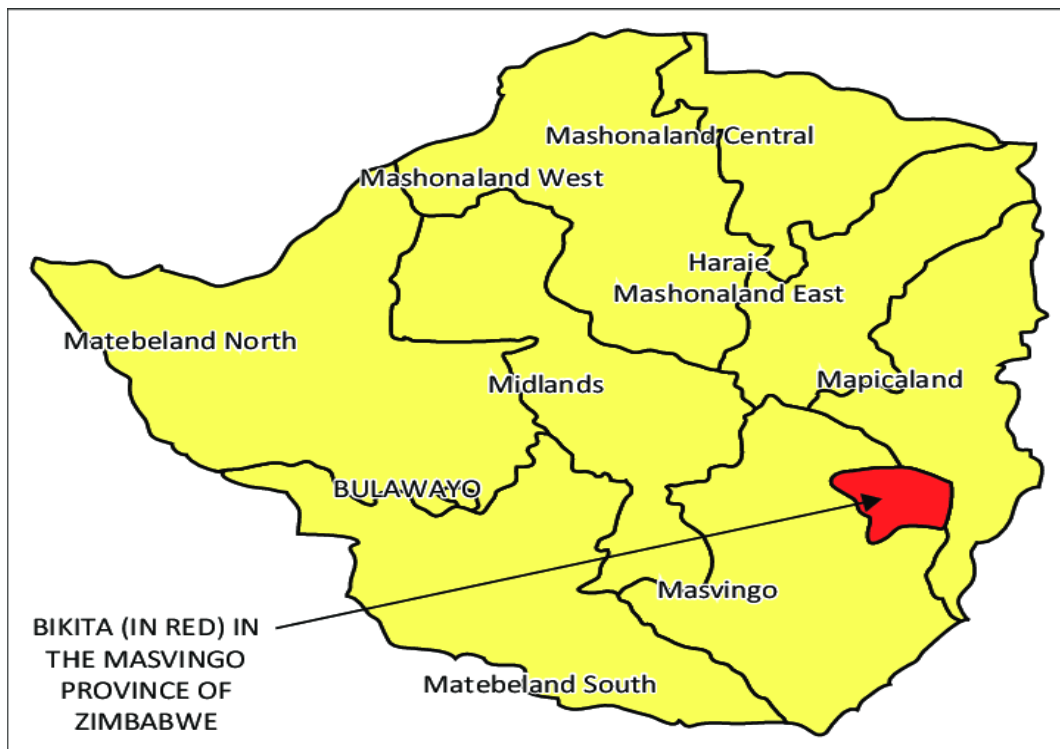


Figure 1: Bikita district map



Bikita district like other rural districts in Zimbabwe presents an appropriate platform to analyse the participation of PwDs in local governance since most PwDs in rural areas are marginalised compared to their counterparts in urban areas. In addition, the researcher is also familiar with the district since it is their home area. In Zimbabwe, disability prevalence stands at 9.3% (UNESCO, 2021). Thus, there are 2 250 000 people with disabilities in Zimbabwe (ibid).

LITERATURE/THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This paper was grounded in the Critical Disability Theory (CDT) and the Human Rights Theory as the participation of PwDs in governance is a fundamental human right, not merely a discretionary policy option that policymakers can choose whether or not to implement (ISER, 2018). In line with the human rights principles, CDT regards PwDs to be equal to any other person, that they have the same human rights as anyone else and that states should protect these rights. As such, there is a need to remove all the barriers hindering PwDs from active participation in local governance since PwDs also have the ingrained right to participate in local governance through voting in elections, and contributions in budgets. consultations as well as public hearings. The CDT criticises traditional assumptions and discussions on disability (barriers to participation), aimed to oppress PwDs and violate their rights (Hosking 2008). The theory argues that 'disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health (medical model); nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion (charity model); rather, it is a question of politics and powerlessness, power over, and power to (participation in local governance.) (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). In this perspective, the legitimisation of paternalistic treatment and oppression of the disabled by non-disabled, manifested through restricted access to economic and social goods for disabled people executed by the non-disabled society, is questioned (Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz, 2017). The critical disability theory considers the rights-based approach an indispensable tool for promoting the equality claims of people with disabilities and for supporting their full integration into society in all aspects while bringing into society the value of diversity (ibid). CDT recognise the rights of PwDs to autonomy (as individuals) and to full participation in society in general and local governance in particular (as a group) (Devlin & Pothier, 2006).

Through consultations (like participation in public hearings in local governance), CDT brings the stories of people with disabilities to the fore and gives voice to these persons (Hosking, 2008). This is a crucial issue because a person who has not experienced a disability cannot imagine what it is like to live with it (Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz, 2017). If such attempts are observed, the non-disabled community imagines such life as full of pain and suffering, with a sense of dependence on others and worthlessness. Therefore, one should listen to and appreciate the perspective of people with disabilities to understand that even a severe disability does not have to take away the joy or the will to live (Hosking, 2008).

Another area of interest in the critical disability theory is how language influences the understanding of disability and the status of people with disabilities (Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz, 2017). The critical theory assumes that language is inherently political and has its, more or less visible, ideological implications (ibid). No word used to describe a certain subgroup in the population is more controversial than the word "disabled" (ibid). On the other



hand, words and images used to describe disability have a direct impact on social attitudes towards people with disabilities. Hosking, (2008) notices that both, in the past and present PwDs are portrayed as inefficient, pathetic, wicked, harmful, dangerous or worthless (thus hindering the participation of PwDs in local governance). Despite attempts to introduce many euphemisms, the media and the cultural industry still consistently reflect the negative attitude towards disability (barriers), which has its source in the medical model of disability understanding (Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz, 2017). CDT explores how these negative attitudes are revealed in discourses of "personal tragedy" and interpretations of disability in terms of powerlessness, submission and dependence (ibid).

The CDT seeks to achieve real empowerment, not just formal, equality (Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz, 2017). CDT provides a theoretical basis for differentiating disability policies - policies that take inclusion, participation, equality and autonomy of people with disabilities into account. CDT criticise oppressive language and encourages the need to give a voice to persons with disabilities themselves (Devlin, Pothier 2006, Hosking 2008, Meekosha, 2013).

The human rights approach is an affirmation of the right of every individual and group to engage in public affairs, and also a part of the solution to poverty and social exclusion (Manatsa, 2015). The human rights model views persons with impairments as an integral part of a diverse human society and culture. A human rights-based approach to disability implies that all people are active subjects with legal claims and that persons with disabilities (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit and Christian Blind Mission (GIZ and CBM, 2012). There arises the need to participate in all spheres of society on an equal basis with their non-disabled peers. It stresses that all humans have rights and that all rights apply to all humans (Leonard Cheshire Disability UK, 2017). It stresses that persons with disabilities are rights holders and decision-makers in their own lives (ibid). Exclusion from services is considered a violation of an individual's human rights. It is worth noting that the right to participate in rural local governance by PwDs is reflected in numerous international instruments and domestic laws (Mironga & Namilonga, 2021).

At the international level, the right to participate in governance by PwDs is stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The UNCRPD is the major treaty that addresses disability at the international level (Manatsa, 2015). Article 29 of the UNCRPD guarantees the political rights of persons with disabilities. It notes that states should ensure the right of persons with disabilities to stand for elections, to effectively hold office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, facilitating the use of assistive and new technologies where appropriate (OSCE/ODIHR, 2019). Article 29 also specifies that states actively promote an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs, without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, and encourage their participation in public affairs, including in the activities and administration of political parties." The CRPD embodies a paradigm shift from a social welfare response to disability to the human rights-based approach (ibid). The CRPD embodies a paradigm shift from a social welfare response to disability to the human rights-based approach.

The obligations set out in the CRPD are reflected and reinforced in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (McVeigh *et al.*, 2021). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are also an important international instrument that underscores the right to participate in governance by PwDs. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015



by the United Nations as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which aims to reduce poverty, combat inequality and address climate change globally. SDG Goal 10, entitled “Reducing Inequality Within and Among Countries”, sets the following target: “By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status” (OSCE/ODIHR, 2019). The SDGs aim to strengthen social inclusion and to leave no one behind, including those with disabilities (McVeigh *et al.*, 2021).

Section 13:2 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) directs State institutions to “involve the people in the formulation and implementation of development programs that affect them”. Sections 22:1 and 3 focus on treating people with physical and mental disabilities with respect and dignity (Chatiza, 2017). The 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe thus plays a pivotal role in the amplification and engagement of citizen voices.

The National Disability Policy (NDP) introduced by the Government of Zimbabwe in 2021 further underscores the participation of PwDs in governance. Paragraph 3.27.1 of the NDP states that the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ):

Ensures that persons with disabilities enjoy and exercise their right to vote or to be elected. Eliminate all provisions and practices which restrict or deny the right to vote of persons with disabilities pp68.

The right to vote or to be elected is one of the several ways to participate by PwDs. In paragraph 3.27.8, the NDP further underscores the need to develop guidelines for the political participation of PwDs at all levels of government. This is meant to promote effective participation in PwDs.

Despite the international standards, obligations and existing good national policies and practices supporting the right to political participation, men and women with disabilities still encounter numerous barriers to joining political participation (OSCE/ODIHR, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach using the case study method was employed to analyse the exclusion of PwDs in the governance of Bikita. According to Creswell (2009), the qualitative research approach involves exploratory means to understand the social problem. It was interpretivist in approach. Interpretive research is a research paradigm that is based on the assumption that social reality is not singular or objective but is rather shaped by human experiences and social contexts (ontology), and is, therefore, best studied within its socio-historic context by reconciling the subjective interpretations of its various participants (epistemology) (Kothari, 2004). Purposive sampling was used as the researcher targeted individuals with specific knowledge about disability and participation in local governance. Purposive sampling selects people with knowledge and experience about the research interest (Creswell, 2009).



Community leaders, that is, the chiefs, headmen and councillors (from Bikita Rural District Council) were interviewed as PwDs reside in the communities they lead. Government officials from the Department of Local Government (District Development Coordinator (DDC), Department of Social Development (DSD), Ministry of Women Affairs and Ministry of Youth) were also interviewed because they closely work with PwDs in the district. Two (2) FGDs with a maximum of 10 people per group were engaged to discuss the exclusion of PwDs in governance in Bikita.

Fifteen key informants (KII) from government line ministries were interviewed. The KIIs were government officials, community leaders, and leaders of OPDs. The interviews were conducted using a flexible semi-structured interview guide. To keep the flow of conversation, respondents were allowed to express their experiences and knowledge of the concepts. This technique was selected because it enabled the researcher to secure relevant responses from the research participants with detailed knowledge and experience on the topic under study.

Two FGDs of ten people each (translating to twenty participants) were conducted. Krueger (2014), indicates that the focus group must have a moderator to preside the focus group meeting. The responsibilities of the moderator are initiating the debate, as well as inspiring participants to respond by expressing their perceptions and opinions confidently. Furthermore, everyone should be able to speak and interact (Krueger, 2014). FGDs need to obtain a group of specific members who should have experience with the target topic for the interview discussions. The KIIs and FGDs enable one to source rich information data from the respondents due to the dialogic nature of the interpretivism paradigm.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

4.1 The Focus Group Discussions

The low participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita was evidenced by the absence of leadership positions among PwDs. One PwD argued that

PwDs do not have any leadership positions in local governance structures in Bikita district. There are no councillors, chiefs or village heads with disabilities in Bikita district. This demonstrates discrimination of PwDs from active participation in local governance.

One FGD participant pointed out that,

The local governance system in Bikthe ita district is discriminatory against PwDs as shown by the absence of PwDs in the hierarchy of the local governance. There is no PwD elected as a councillor in Bikita district.

The inaccessibility of public infrastructure due to the absence of ramps at public offices was cited as another hindrance. Most public offices lack ramps which makes access a real challenge for PwDs, especially wheelchair users. Quoting one wheelchair user,

Using a wheelchair in the Bikita district is very difficult because the terrain is mountainous, most of the roads are dusty and the government offices are inaccessible due to lack of ramps.



As a result, attending consultation meetings at government offices is a real challenge to wheelchair users. In most cases, I end up failing to attend the consultation meetings.

Inaccessible information was identified as another obstacle to the effective participation of PwDs in local governance. It is imperative to note that different disabilities have different information requirements in terms of accessibility. For instance, persons with visual impairment require information in braille and large print while persons with hearing impairment require the support of sign language interpreters. One person with a hearing impairment indicated,

Even if I attend the consultation meetings, I feel excluded because normally there is no sign language interpreter to assist me. In the absence of a sign language interpreter, I cannot hear the presentations and cannot follow the discussions during the consultation meetings.

The low participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita was also attributed to poverty among PwDs. 90% of PwDs who participated in the FGDs were unemployed. Without employment, it is not surprising that PwDs are vulnerable to dehumanising poverty. One participant with a disability explained:

PwDs cannot contest in local government elections as councillors because of poverty. PwDs are poor because they are usually unemployed and rely on begging for survival. Since election campaigns require a lot of money, I cannot afford the cost due to poverty.

The lack of assistive devices like wheelchairs and spectacles among PwDs also explains the low participation of PwDs in local governance. Due to poverty, some PwDs cannot afford assistive devices such as wheelchairs. Consequently, this compromises their mobility thus making attendance at consultation meetings very difficult if not impossible.

Stigmatisation and discrimination were also another barrier for PwDs. Negative cultural beliefs and attitudes were said to be the breeding ground of stigmatisation and discrimination among PwDs. Stigmatisation and discrimination are fostered by several myths about disability. For example, the myth that PwDs cannot assume leadership roles.

Gender discrimination was cited as another barrier. Women with disabilities argued that they face double jeopardy since they are discriminated against along disability and gender lines. Unlike their male counterparts, women with disabilities suggested that they are more marginalised due to patriarchy. One woman with a disability argued

I am marginalised from participation in local governance because I am a woman with a disability. As such, I am suffering from the double tragedy of being a woman and having a disability.

The intersectionality between gender and disability is visible in the low participation of PwDs in the Bikita district. According to the intersectionality between gender and disability, women with disabilities are more disadvantaged than their male counterparts with disabilities in terms of participation in local governance.

Low participation of PwDs was also blamed on a lack of affiliation with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). OPDs represent the interests of the PwDs. It was observed



that the Zimbabwe Association for the Visually Handicapped (ZAVH) is one of the OPDs operating in Bikita. One PwD argued

Since OPDs play an important role in mobilising civic participation among their members, most PwDs in the Bikita district lack participation in local governance because they are not affiliated with any OPD.

Some PwDs displayed ignorance about membership in OPDs arguing that they are not aware of the existence of OPDs in Bikita. However, the majority of the PwDs that participated in FGDs are members of ZAVH. PwDs encouraged each other to join OPDs as a way to enhance their participation in local governance.

A lack of national documents by PwDs was noted. Birth certificates and national identity cards are a requirement for one to participate in elections. One PwD,

I am aged 30 but do not have a birth certificate or a national identity card. My late parents did not take a birth certificate for me because they did not see any hope in me as a child with a disability. Without these vital national documents, I can neither vote nor contest as a councillor.

Participation in local governance provides citizens with a platform for decision-making at a local level. Failure to participate in local governance implies exclusion from decision-making by PwDs in community development activities. The lack of participation of PwDs in local governance in the Bikita district has resulted in the growth of poverty among PwDs. Since most PwDs are unemployed, they experience both income and material poverty.

Since Bikita is a rural area, agriculture is a key economic activity that depends on access to land and other inputs like seeds and fertilisers among others. It was pointed out that PwDs have limited access to land and other agricultural inputs. One PwD argued

I do not own a piece of land for farming because my village head feels that I have no ability to do farming on my own. Despite applying for a piece of land at the Ministry of Lands, I have yet to get any offer so far. I feel I'm denied the land offer because of my disability. In addition, I have also failed to get seeds under the government's command agriculture programme (Pfumvudza) because my name was not included on the distribution list. The people in my ward feel that I cannot effectively farm because of my disability hence I was not given the seeds last season.

Increased vulnerability to natural disasters is another negative impact of the lack of participation of PwDs in local governance. Bikita is one of the disaster-prone districts in Zimbabwe. Droughts and floods are some of the notable natural disasters common in Bikita district. It was argued that the vulnerability of the Bikita district to disasters entails the need for disability mainstreaming in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategies. However, the lack of participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita has failed to influence disability inclusion in DRR. Consequently, the DRR strategies in Bikita need to be disability inclusive. Low participation of PwDs in local governance has also compromised access to justice by PwDs. Women and Girls with Disabilities (WGwDs) were said to be more vulnerable to Gender Based Violence (GBV) due to several factors like negative cultural practices. As such, WGwDs are in great need of access to justice (through professional and friendly service provision at police stations and courts).



Data from KIIs

Officials from government line ministries had different views on the participation of PwDs in local governance. Lack of knowledge about disability-inclusive development among government officials and community leaders was identified as one hindrance to the participation of PwDs in local governance. An official from one government department admitted

The concept of disability-inclusive development is new to us. However, through different programmes, we are learning more about disability-inclusive development. We are slowly adapting our systems and structures to be disability inclusive.

From the foregoing, the need for disability-inclusive training for government officials and community leaders was emphasised. Awareness raising on disability issues and basic sign language training for all government officials and community leaders are some notable examples.

Lack of education among PwDs was identified to be another obstacle impeding the participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita. It was argued that most PwDs lacked education. One government official noted

PwDs are failing to participate in local governance in the Bikita district because of a lack of education. Mostly PwDs are denied the opportunity to go to school because of several factors. In some cases, the local schools are reluctant to enrol PwDs because they feel that the schools do not have the necessary facilities to cater for different disabilities. In other cases, the parents of children with disabilities (CwDs) cannot afford the fees charged at special disability schools (like Copota). In addition, some parents of CwDs are reluctant to invest in the education of their children because they are hopeless about their disability condition.

It was emphasised that education is an important empowerment tool that facilitates active citizenship participation in local governance. The provision of education to PwDs was underscored as a progressive empowerment initiative. Negative cultural attitudes from the society were also blamed for the lack of participation of PwDs in local governance. Denying PwDs leadership positions because society believes they lack ability is one example of a negative cultural attitude. A community leader in the Bikita district argued

Due to negative cultural attitudes, the Bikita community perceives disability as an inability. As such PwDs are denied key leadership positions (councillors, headman, chiefs) because society has no confidence in their ability.

The negative cultural attitudes were blamed for perpetuating stigmatisation and discrimination of PwDs in the Bikita district as the PwDs are denied leadership positions. To combat the negative cultural attitudes, awareness-raising campaigns for disability inclusion were encouraged.

Lack of funding by the government was also identified to be another factor hindering disability inclusion in local governance in Bikita. Despite the government's commitment to promoting disability inclusion as shown by the introduction of the National Disability Policy (NDP) in



2021, the lack of resources by the government was said to be derailing progress towards disability inclusion in the district.

The interviewed government officials also blamed PwDs for their self-exclusion in local governance and development processes. In other words, the ignorance of some PwDs was blamed for the lack of participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita. One official from the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development (MWACSMED) stated,

Despite numerous calls for women to apply for business loans offered by the Ministry of Women's Affairs, we have not received any loan applications from Women with Disabilities (WwDs).

Another official from the Ministry of Youth, Sport, Arts and Recreation (MOYSAR) expressed similar sentiments,

Since the beginning of the year, we have yet to receive loan applications from Youth with Disabilities (YwDs) in Bikita district. This is despite several calls for youths to apply for start-up capital from the ministry.

It is encouraging to note that, the Zimbabwe Association for the Visually Handicapped (ZAVH) is also promoting the participation of PwDs in local government in Bikita through various initiatives. The director of ZAVH argued

The organisation is conducting community awareness-raising campaigns on disability inclusion to demystify myths about disability. In addition, the organisation engaged the district registrar to facilitate the registration of PwDs without birth certificates and national identity documents in the district. So far, 375 PwDs got birth certificates and national identity cards in Bikita.

It is hoped that due to the awareness-raising campaigns conducted by ZAVH in the district, the community was said to be slowly appreciating the fact that ‘disability does not mean inability’.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Local Governance Structure of Bikita District

The paper established that local governance structures in the Bikita district are made up of District Development Committees, Ward Development Committees (WADCOs), and Village Development Committees (VIDCOs). The VIDCOs led by a village head coordinate development at the village level. The WADCOs led by an elected councillor coordinate development at the ward level. It is worth noting that administratively, the councillors are under the control of the Bikita Rural District Council. The District Development Committee led by the District Development Coordinator (DDC) coordinates the district development initiatives in partnership with other government line ministries and development partners like NGOs.



Disability Exclusion in Bikita's Local Governance Structure

Lack of disability inclusion was observed in Bikita's local governance system because none of the 15 participants from the interviewed officials from government line ministries had a disability. The absence of a PwD among the 15 interviewed government officials demonstrated a lack of disability inclusion in the government recruiting policy. Lack of disability inclusion in the government system may mean a lack of understanding of disability issues among government officers. It is not surprising that the local government system in Bikita is discriminatory to PwDs. That explains the low participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita district.

Low Level of Participation of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in Local Governance

Low participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita district was observed. In Bikita's local governance, PwDs lack meaningful leadership positions like chiefs, councillors, and village heads due to many factors. Negative cultural perceptions that discriminate against PwDs are one explanation for the lack of leadership positions among PwDs. There is a myth in the district that PwDs cannot lead.

Barriers to the Participation of PwDs in Local Governance

It is argued that barriers undermining the participation of people with disabilities in local governance processes in the Bikita district are multi-dimensional and multi-factorial. The following are the barriers hindering the participation of PwDs in local governance in the Bikita district.

Lack of Funding

The lack of funding due to poverty further explains the low participation of PwDs in local governance in the Bikita district. It was indicated that campaigning for a local leadership position like becoming a Councillor requires a lot of money whereby most PwDs cannot afford due to poverty and unemployment.

Stigmatisation and Discrimination

Stigmatisation and discrimination were also blamed for the low participation of PwDs in local governance in the Bikita district. PwDs argued that the Bikita community has several negative cultural myths about disability which amounts to stigmatisation and discrimination. For example, PwDs are considered incapable of assuming leadership positions in Bikita. This is in line with a study conducted in Ghana which argued that over 95 per cent of people with disabilities in Ghana reported that stigma against people with disabilities played a major role in their political marginalisation (Schmidt *et al.*, 2017). It was explained that the negative attitudes towards disability are often rooted in cultural and social norms, where physical and sensory impairments are often associated with punishment from God (Schmidt *et al.*, 2017). As such, social attitudes are strongly associated with political participation.



Lack of Education

Low participation in local governance in the Bikita district was attributed to a lack of education among PwDs. Lack of education among PwDs is thus a major barrier to participation in local governance in Bikita. This study established that 40% of the 20 participants who took part in the FGDs did not attend high school. Consequently, PwDs do not have formal qualifications which makes it very difficult for them to effectively participate in local governance in the district. Without formal education, PwDs lack an understanding of the dynamics of participation in local governance. This was confirmed by Hlatywayo and Mapolisa (2022) who argued that the level of education achieved is generally lower among individuals with a disability compared to those without a disability. People with disabilities are less likely to attend school; thus, face low employment opportunities and reduced productivity in adulthood (Hlatywayo & Mapolisa, 2022).

Inaccessibility

At the time of data collection, most government offices in the Bikita district were inaccessible to PwDs, especially wheelchair users. In addition, the mountainous terrain and dusty roads in most wards of the Bikita district make the movement of wheelchair users very difficult. Furthermore, inaccessible information was found to be another obstacle to the participation of PwDs in local governance. Badu *et al.* (2017) noted that the degree of exclusion from participation in local governance elections varies by the type of impairment. The lack of sign language interpreters in the Bikita district was found to be a cause of concern. The visually impaired persons had difficulties in accessing information in small print. It was also observed that all the information on notice boards at local government offices and Bikita Rural District Council offices was in small print rather than braille format and large print.

Poverty

Poverty is another factor hindering the participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita. Since 90% of the PwDs who participated in the FGD were unemployed, it is not surprising that they were poor as they struggled to earn a living. This confirms the intersectionality of poverty and disability. Hlatywayo and Mapolisa, (2022) affirmed this point when they argued that disability is closely linked with poverty resulting in most students with disabilities failing to raise their tuition fees at tertiary learning institutions. Ingstad and Eide (2011) further noted that with limited access to education and physical barriers to overcome, people with disabilities are most often severely disadvantaged in the employment market and, if employed at all, often get low-paid jobs and even lower salaries than their non-disabled colleagues.

Non-affiliation to Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)

Lack of affiliation to Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) is another obstacle to the effective participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita. Although the majority of PwDs that participated in the FGDs indicated that they are members of ZAVH, some are not affiliated with any OPD.). In Zimbabwe, the establishment of the National Disability Board (NDB) enabled the formulation of policies that ensured that people with disabilities lived independently and had access to all social services. It also supported an initiative to estimate the costs of the welfare and rehabilitation services targeting people with disabilities and made provision for people with disabilities to elect two senators to represent them.



Lack of National Registration Documents

The lack of participation of PwDs in local government was also attributed lack of national registration documents (birth certificates and identity cards). National registration documents like birth certificates and identity cards facilitate one's participation in local governance processes and elections. It was indicated that without national registration documents, one is unable to vote or contest as a candidate in local governance elections. Unfortunately, most PwDs in Bikita district have neither a birth certificate nor a national identity card due to various reasons. As such, PwDs without critical national documents have limited capacity to participate in local governance.

The Impact of the Exclusion of PwDs in Local Governance Participation in Bikita District

Barriers to the participation of PwDs in local governance have resulted in the exclusion of PwDs in development activities in the Bikita district. PwDs continue to be marginalised in both local and national development processes, and this marginalisation contributes to the high rates of chronic poverty among people with disabilities (Chataika *et al.*, 2014).

Exclusion from Decision Making

Exclusion from decision-making was identified as one result of the lack of participation of PwDs in local governance. PwDs in the FGDs complained that they were being left out of decision-making because of their low participation in local governance. Due to attitudinal, legal, physical, economic, social and communication barriers to their participation in society, persons with disabilities are very often left out of decision-making processes and decisions are made on their behalf (International Disability Alliance, 2019). Among others, persons with intellectual disabilities and persons with psychosocial disabilities are particularly affected by stigma and denied the capacity to meaningfully contribute in any way beneficial to their community and societies (*ibid*). Persons with disabilities being excluded from decision-making processes perpetuate their exclusion from all areas of society, as their perspectives are systematically ignored, leading to public policies and programmes that are not responsive, not effective and continue to hinder their rights.

Growth of Poverty among PwDs

Poverty is both a cause and consequence of the exclusion of PwDs from participation in local governance (Worm, 2012). Failure to participate in local governance has greatly impoverished PwDs in Bikita by limiting their economic opportunities. The study established that 90% of the PwDs that participated in FGDs were unemployed indicating that they have unreliable sources of income. Disability may lead to poverty through lost earnings, due to lack of employment or under-employment, and through the additional costs of living with a disability, such as extra medical, housing, and transport costs (Ingstad & Eide, 2011).

Low Agricultural Productivity

The PwDs complained about their failure to secure land for farming. Since Bikita is a rural area, access to land for agriculture is pertinent. Manyeruke and Mangwanya (2020) observed that PwDs have generally been excluded from mainstream development and poverty alleviation and empowerment programmes. The Fast Track Land Reform Policy (FTLRP) document never had clauses or sections dedicated to people living with disabilities (*ibid*). Government officials



who are tasked with dealing with development issues simply ignore PwDs as they are seen as a burden for their families to deal with or simply not capable of partaking in development issues (Choruma, 2007).

Loss of Economic Opportunities

Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in Bikita argued that they have also missed key economic opportunities for their personal development because of multiple barriers hindering their effective participation in local governance. Loss of employment opportunities is one notable example. According to Mtetwa (2018), the denial of employment opportunities by both the public and private sectors to PwDs on account of perceived incapacities books PwDs a permanent seat on the train of poverty.

Vulnerability to Disasters

Since Bikita is a disaster-prone district, PwDs' lack of participation in local governance has exposed them to natural disasters like floods and droughts. Consequently, the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategies in Bikita are disability exclusive. Current disaster paradigms are biased towards helping the already privileged or physically abled. Disaster risk reduction (DRR) is constructed around the abilities and needs of people without impairments in mobility, hearing, sight, speech, stamina and cognition, and mental or emotional stability. According to Dube (2007), policies for DRR presume the dependence of the person with disabilities upon a caregiver and disregard situations in which there may not be anyone to assist the person in question, nor do they consider a person with a disability as an asset.

IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The barriers to participation in local governance, as identified in this paper, are in themselves discriminatory. An all-inclusive approach is required from all actors in the local governance. Governance is effective and meaningful when all the actors partake in its process. This fosters democracy, inclusivity, transparency, and openness.

CONCLUSION

Poverty, lack of education, stigmatisation and discrimination, and lack of national registration documents were some of the cited factors for the low participation of PwDs in local governance in Bikita district. The low participation of PwDs in local governance has resulted in the exclusion of PwDs in development processes in Bikita. Low agricultural productivity, increased vulnerability to disasters, exclusion from decision making and growth of poverty among others illustrate the exclusion of PwDs from the development processes. It can be argued that the exclusion of PwDs in local governance is detrimental to the participation of PwDs in development and decision-making. The barriers to the participation of PwDs in local governance in the Bikita district occur at various levels which include the family level, community level as well as institutional level. Without disability-inclusive structures in Bikita, PwDs continue to be excluded from participation in local governance. The lack of participation



of PwDs in local governance has resulted in the disempowerment and exclusion of PwDs in development activities thus leading to dehumanising poverty.

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