

# The Determinants of Poor Service Delivery in Zimbabwe's Local Government System

Sylvester Marumahoko<sup>1</sup>, Tafadzwa Moyo<sup>1</sup>, Keith Tichaona Tashu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Zimbabwe Open University

\*Corresponding Author's Email: [marumahokos@zou.ac.zw](mailto:marumahokos@zou.ac.zw)

Received: 15 June 2025 | Accepted: 10 August 2025 | Published: 30 September 2025

## Abstract

This article, grounded in decentralisation theory, examined the determinants of poor service delivery in Zimbabwe's local government system, against a backdrop of chronic underperformance and growing public discontent. Using a survey-based methodology and statistical analysis via SPSS, the study captured public perceptions to uncover the root causes of service delivery failures. Findings revealed a divided citizenry, with a significant proportion expressing dissatisfaction with the management of local services. Governance-related issues, including corruption, weak accountability, limited local autonomy, poor community engagement and inadequate legal and policy frameworks, emerged as the most critical contributors to poor performance. In contrast, technical challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and human resource shortages were not widely perceived as primary obstacles. These results suggested that governance failures, rather than resource constraints, lie at the heart of the service delivery crisis. The study concludes by advocating for stronger governance and accountability mechanisms, institutionalised community engagement and meaningful reform of the legal and policy frameworks governing local government—all of which are essential steps toward improving service delivery and rebuilding public trust in local governance.

**Key words:** Determinants, Poor, Service Delivery, Zimbabwe, Local Government

## Introduction

Service delivery in Zimbabwe is in a state of crisis, as reported by both public officials and citizens. Basic services—healthcare, education, water supply, waste management and public transport—are increasingly becoming unreliable, underfunded or entirely unavailable in many areas (Marumahoko, et al, 2020). This deterioration has significantly reduced quality of life and eroded public trust in government institutions. While the symptoms of this decline are clear, its root causes remain insufficiently analysed. Commonly cited factors include chronic underinvestment, corruption, mismanagement of public funds, weak accountability and political interference (Mlambo, 2023; Mupandanyama, 2023; eBusiness Weekly, 2025; Good Governance Africa, 2024; United Zimbabwe Alliance, 2024; Marumahoko, 2023). Structural conditions such as economic instability and elite capture are also frequently identified in the literature as significant impediments to effective service delivery. However, in the absence of transparent data and comprehensive research, these explanations remain speculative rather than evidence based.

Visible failures—such as water shortages, crumbling healthcare infrastructure and failing education systems—highlight systemic dysfunction. Institutional weaknesses, such as poor intergovernmental coordination, unclear mandates and the absence of performance monitoring, are also believed to play a critical role (Chigwata and Marumahoko, 2018; Nyikadzino and Nhema, 2016; Machingauta, 2016). The same applies to informal networks and patronage systems that are believed to distort priorities and hinder equitable service provision. Citizens, particularly in rural and high-density urban areas, are increasingly forced to rely on unsafe or costly alternatives, when local service delivery fails. With municipal water systems failing, many purchase water at inflated prices or resort to unsafe sources, risking outbreaks of diseases like cholera. Similarly, the collapse of public healthcare pushes people toward unregulated clinics and traditional healers, where care is inconsistent and often dangerous. These coping strategies, though necessary, place a heavy financial burden on already impoverished households. They entrench inequality and create a two-tiered system where only the affluent can access reliable services. More alarmingly, they reflect the quiet normalisation of state withdrawal from essential duties, effectively privatising services by default. This erodes the social contract and undermines long-term development, perpetuating poverty and vulnerability. When citizens feel ignored or believe resources are misused, they become disengaged or defiant (Afrobarometer, 2020; Mlambo, 2023). This weakens local governance, undermines collective action, and fosters a culture of apathy—a dangerous trajectory for any society striving for inclusive development and democratic accountability. Understanding where and why service delivery fails is essential for designing targeted and effective policy responses. Research provides policymakers with empirical evidence about the specific challenges faced by local governments—ranging from funding shortages and administrative inefficiencies to corruption and weak accountability mechanisms. By identifying these root causes, decision-makers can develop interventions that are not only relevant but also context-specific.

A data-driven approach enabled a strategic allocation of resources to sectors and regions most in need (Commonwealth Local Government Forum, 2021). For example, pinpointing underperforming areas—such as healthcare, education or infrastructure—allows policymakers to concentrate efforts where the impact is likely to be greatest. Moreover, insights from research can inform capacity-building initiatives, such as training programs for local officials, helping to strengthen institutional competence and responsiveness. Importantly, research can establish baseline indicators that serve as reference points for tracking progress over time. This facilitates evidence-based monitoring and evaluation, enabling continuous refinement of strategies in response to changing circumstances or emerging challenges. Regular analysis also supports the creation of feedback loops, allowing policymakers to assess the effectiveness of their interventions and make timely adjustments to improve outcomes.

## **Research Methodology**

This study employed a quantitative research methodology to investigate the underlying factors contributing to poor service delivery in Zimbabwe's local government system. The quantitative approach enabled the collection of measurable data to identify patterns, test relationships between variables and support data-driven conclusions. The target population comprised individuals directly involved with or affected by local government services in Zimbabwe, including local government officials (mayors, councillors and administrative staff), service recipients (residents) and other relevant stakeholders (for example, NGOs, local activists and service providers). To capture diverse perspectives, participants were drawn from various levels of local government, including urban, rural and peri-urban areas. A structured

questionnaire was developed and administered to a sample of 40 respondents. The questionnaire included a mix of closed-ended questions, using Likert scales, multiple-choice and dichotomous items designed to quantify perceptions, experiences and satisfaction levels regarding service delivery. The instrument was pilot tested for clarity and reliability before full deployment.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant experience or direct exposure to local government operations. While not probabilistic, this sampling method was appropriate given the study's focus on informed insights and allowed for targeted data collection from key stakeholders. Data were collected using self-administered and researcher-assisted questionnaires, depending on participants' accessibility and preferences. The collected data were then coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Analytical procedures included descriptive statistics (for example, percentages) to summarise the data. The study faced a few limitations. Access to some high-level officials was restricted due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Time and resource constraints also affected the scale of data collection.

## Results and Discussion

This section presented the results of the study.

### Prioritisation of service delivery

Prioritisation of service delivery in local government significantly influences the quality and efficiency of services, either positively or negatively. When done effectively, it helps improve service delivery by ensuring that limited resources—such as funding, staff and time—are directed toward the most essential and impactful services, such as water provision, waste management and emergency response. It allows local governments to operate more strategically, aligning services with community needs and development goals, while also increasing operational efficiency by avoiding duplication and unnecessary expenditure. However, if prioritisation is poorly managed, it can hinder service delivery by neglecting low-priority areas or services, leading to inequality and dissatisfaction among residents. A lack of transparency in how priorities are set can also breed mistrust, while an excessive focus on short-term needs may result in the postponement of critical long-term investments, such as infrastructure development. Therefore, while prioritisation can be a powerful tool for enhancing local governance, its success depends heavily on fair, transparent and inclusive decision-making processes. When asked about their perceptions on whether local government prioritised service delivery, the participants appeared to cast down on the proficiency of local government.

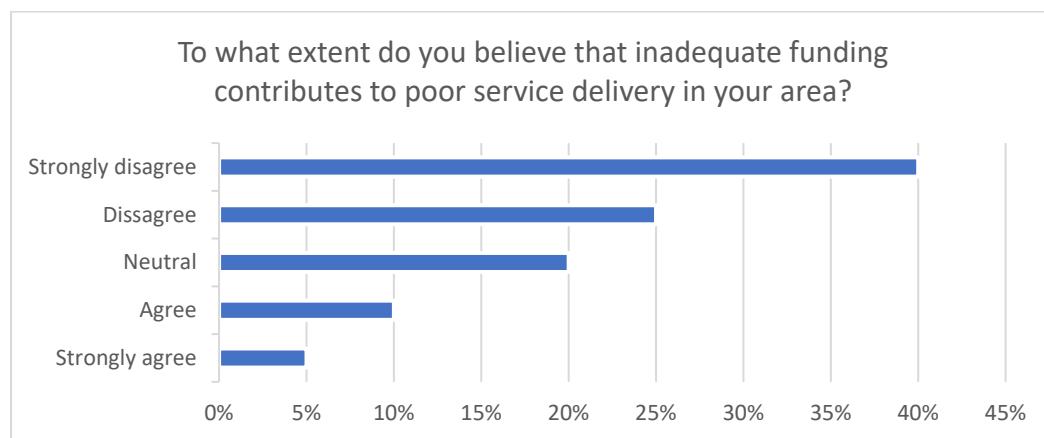


**Figure 1: Perceptions on the issue of service delivery. Source: Researchers (2025)**

Survey results suggested that 52% of respondents believed that service delivery was not prioritised while 48% believed it was. This indicated a divided public perception of local government performance. The slight majority suggested that more people felt neglected or dissatisfied with how services are being managed, potentially pointing to issues such as poor communication, unequal service distribution, or a lack of transparency in decision-making. The close split, however, also revealed that nearly half the population does see some level of prioritisation, which may reflect that certain areas or groups are benefiting more visibly from local government efforts. Overall, this suggested inconsistency in service delivery and highlights the need for improved stakeholder engagement, clearer communication of priorities and more equitable distribution of services to rebuild trust and confidence among the broader community.

### **Infrastructure funding as a determinant of poor service delivery**

Adequate investment generally improves local government service delivery by providing the necessary resources to maintain infrastructure, hire skilled personnel and expand or upgrade services. It enables better planning, innovation and responsiveness to community needs. However, if investment is mismanaged or poorly allocated, it can hinder service delivery by funding the wrong priorities, creating inefficiencies or failing to reach the areas most in need. So, while sufficient funding is essential, its effective use is equally important.



**Figure 2: Funding as a determinant of service delivery**

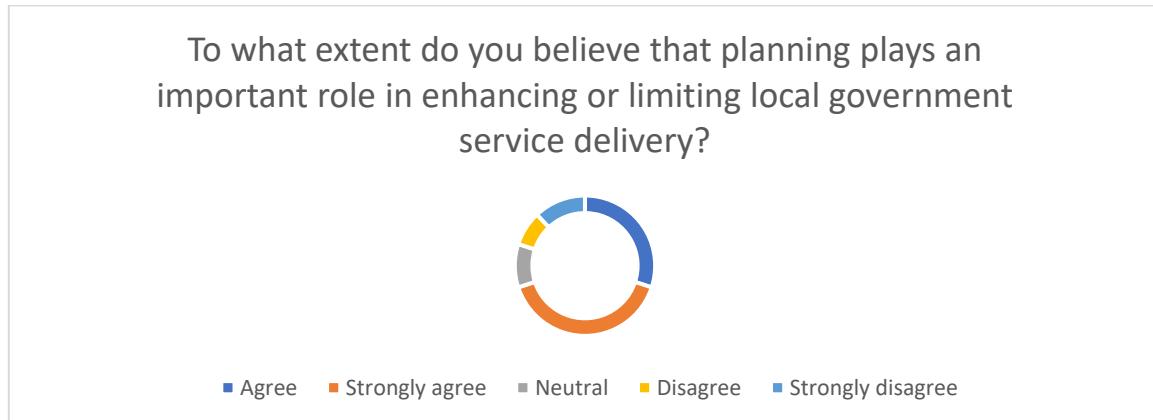
Source: Researchers (2025)

The statistics indicated that most respondents (65%)—25% disagreed and 40% strongly disagreed—did not believe that inadequate funding significantly affected local government service delivery. This suggested that most participants perceive other factors, such as mismanagement, poor planning or lack of accountability, as more critical issues than funding itself. Meanwhile, only 15% (5% agreed and 10% strongly agreed) think inadequate funding is a key problem and 20% remained neutral. Overall, this data reflected a public perception that local government service challenges may stem more from how resources were used rather than how much funding is available.

### **Planning as a determinant of service delivery**

Effective planning played a crucial role in improving local government service delivery by setting clear priorities, allocating resources efficiently and anticipating future needs. It helps ensure that services are delivered on time, within budget, and in ways that meet community

expectations. Good planning also promotes coordination among departments and reduces duplication of efforts. However, if planning is overly rigid, lacks community input or is not well-implemented, it can hinder service delivery by leading to delays, misallocation of resources or services that do not align with actual public needs.



**Figure 3: Planning as a factor influencing poor local service delivery**

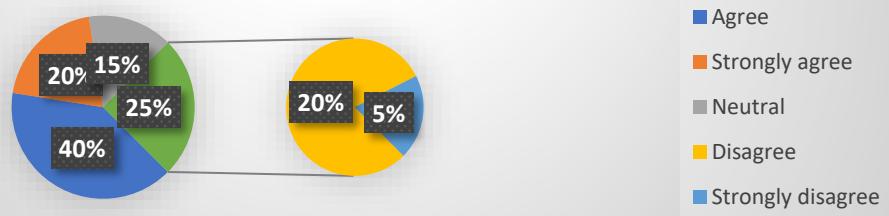
Source: Researchers (2025)

The statistics suggest that a significant majority of respondents (70%)—30% agreeing and 40% strongly agreeing—believe that planning plays a positive role in enhancing service delivery, even in a local government jurisdiction known for poor service delivery. This indicates that the public sees effective planning as a potential solution to current service delivery challenges. Only 20% (8% disagree and 12% strongly disagree) are of the opinion that planning does not enhance service delivery, while 10% remain neutral. Overall, the data reflects a strong public perception that improving planning processes could lead to better outcomes, highlighting the importance of strategic, inclusive and well-implemented planning in addressing service delivery issues.

### Corruption as a determinant of deficient service delivery

Corruption is a critical determinant of service delivery, especially at the local government level. It directly affects how resources are allocated, managed and used, often leading to inefficiencies, inflated costs and poor-quality services. When funds intended for infrastructure, health, education or other essential services are misused or embezzled, the community suffers from delayed or incomplete projects and a lack of access to basic needs. Corruption also undermines transparency and accountability, allowing unqualified contractors to win tenders through bribery or favouritism. This not only affects the quality of work but erodes public trust in government institutions. In the long term, persistent corruption discourages citizen participation, weakens oversight mechanisms and fosters a culture of impunity. Therefore, tackling corruption is key to improving service delivery. Strengthening governance systems, enforcing anti-corruption laws, promoting transparency and involving communities in decision-making can help ensure that resources are used effectively to meet public needs.

## Would you consider corruption to be a primary cause of poor service delivery in your area?



**Figure 4: Corruption as a determinant of poor service delivery**

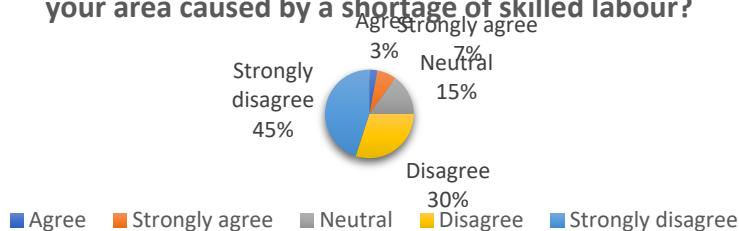
Source: Researchers (2025)

The statistics revealed that most respondents (60)—40% agreed and 20% strongly agreed—believed that corruption limited-service delivery in the local government area. This indicated a strong public perception that corruption is a major factor contributing to poor service delivery. An additional, 15% are neutral, possibly reflecting uncertainty or lack of direct evidence, while only 25% (20% disagree and 5% strongly disagree) do not see corruption as a significant issue. From these responses, we can read that most participants view corruption as a key barrier to effective governance and service provision. It suggests a lack of trust in local authorities and implies that addressing corruption could be a critical step toward improving service delivery. The data underscored the need for greater transparency, accountability and anti-corruption measures within the local government system.

## Manpower deficiency as a determinant of poor service delivery

Skilled labour is a vital determinant of service delivery in local government, as it directly influences the quality, efficiency and reliability of services provided to the public. Skilled workers bring the necessary expertise, training, and experience to plan, implement and manage services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure maintenance and waste management. When local governments have access to well-trained personnel, they are better equipped to deliver services that meet professional standards, solve problems effectively and respond to community needs. Skilled labour also enhances innovation, proper use of technology and adherence to regulations, all of which contribute to improved service outcomes. Conversely, a lack of skilled labour can hinder service delivery by leading to poor planning, project delays, substandard work and inefficient use of resources. It can also increase dependency on external consultants, which may strain limited budgets and reduce local capacity-building.

## In your opinion, is poor local service delivery in your area caused by a shortage of skilled labour?



**Figure 5: Lack of skilled personnel as a determinant of poor services**

Source: Researchers (2025)

The statistics suggested that most respondents (75%)—30% disagreed and 45% strongly disagreed—did not believe that poor local service delivery is primarily caused by a shortage of skilled labour. This indicated a strong public perception that other factors, such as corruption, poor planning or mismanagement, may be more responsible for service delivery challenges in the local government. Only a small percentage (10%)—3% agreed and 7% strongly agreed—see a lack of skilled labour as a significant issue, while 15% remained neutral, possibly indicating uncertainty or a belief that multiple factors contribute. Overall, these responses pointed to a public belief that the problem lies less with the availability of skilled workers and more with how the system is managed, suggesting that improving governance, transparency and accountability may have a greater impact on service delivery than simply addressing skills shortages.

### **Lack of accountability as a determinant to poor local services**

A lack of accountability is a major cause of poor local service delivery because it allows inefficiency, corruption and negligence to go unchecked. When local government officials and service providers are not held responsible for their actions or performance, there is little incentive to deliver quality services or use public resources effectively. Without accountability, funds can be misused, projects delayed and services delivered below standard—often without consequences. It also weakens oversight mechanisms and erodes public trust, as citizens feel their concerns are ignored and their needs unmet. Moreover, the absence of accountability makes it difficult to identify and correct mistakes, which further hampers improvement.



**Figure 6: Lack of accountability as a determinant to poor local services**

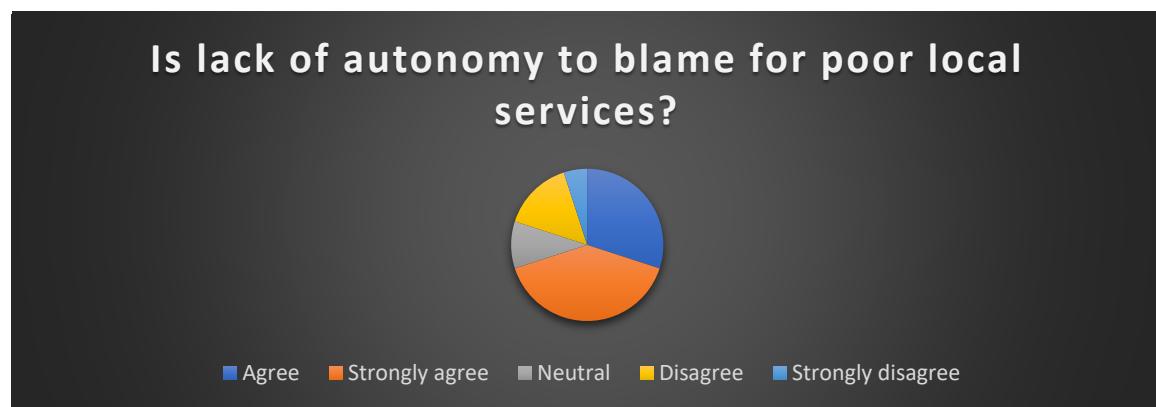
Source: Researchers (2025)

The statistics indicated that a clear majority of respondents (70%)—30% agreed and 40% strongly agreed—believed that a lack of accountability was to blame for poor local service delivery. This strong consensus suggests that the public perceives weak oversight, lack of responsibility and minimal consequences for poor performance as key reasons why local services are failing. Only a small minority (15%)—10% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed—did not see accountability as a major issue, while 15% were neutral, possibly reflecting uncertainty or the belief that multiple factors are at play. Overall, these responses revealed that the public strongly associates poor service delivery with a failure to hold officials

and service providers accountable, emphasising the need for improved governance, transparency and enforcement of responsibility within local government structures.

### **Lack of autonomy as a determinant of poor local service delivery**

Local autonomy matters in service delivery by allowing local governments to tailor services to community needs, make faster decisions, and allocate resources more efficiently, which can enhance effectiveness. However, it can also undermine service delivery if local authorities lack the capacity, accountability or oversight, leading to mismanagement, inequality or corruption. Therefore, the impact of local autonomy depends on how well it is supported by strong governance systems.



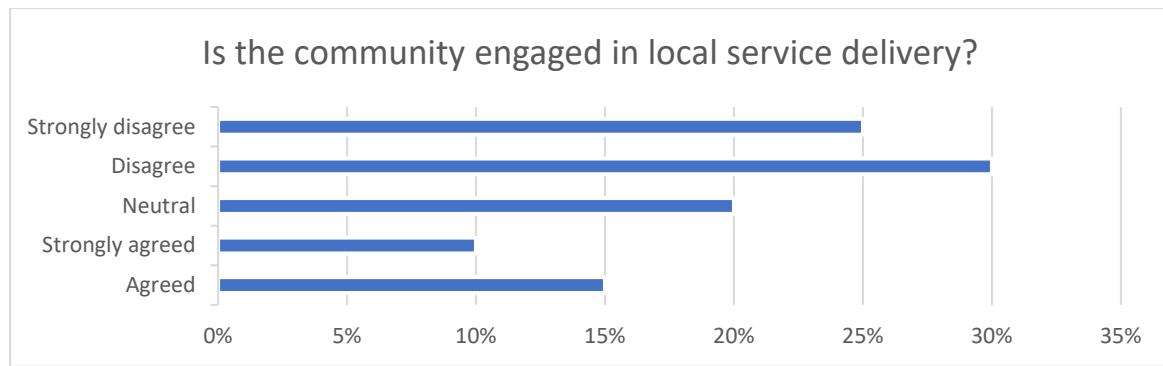
**Figure 7: Lack of local autonomy's impact on service delivery**

**Source:** Researchers (2025)

The statistics showed that a large majority of respondents (70%)—30% agreed and 40% strongly agreed—believe that a lack of local autonomy was to blame for poor local service delivery. This suggests a strong public perception that local governments are not empowered enough to make independent decisions, manage resources effectively or respond to local needs efficiently. Only 20% (15% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed) did not see a lack of autonomy as a key issue, while 10% were neutral, possibly indicating uncertainty or mixed views. Overall, the responses infer that most people see limited decision-making power at the local level as a major barrier to effective service delivery, pointing to a need for greater decentralisation and empowerment of local authorities to improve service outcomes.

### **Community engagement as a determinant of local service delivery**

Community engagement is a key determinant of local service delivery because it ensures that services are aligned with the actual needs and priorities of the people. When communities are actively involved in planning, decision-making and monitoring, local governments can deliver more responsive, inclusive and effective services. Engagement also promotes transparency, accountability and trust between citizens and authorities. Without it, services risk being poorly targeted, mismanaged or rejected by the very people they are meant to serve.



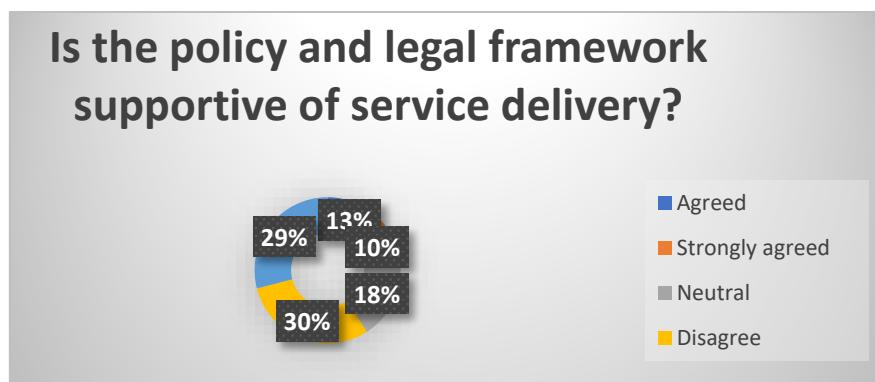
**Figure 8: Community's involvement in service delivery**

Source: Researchers (2025)

The statistics show that most respondents (55%)—30% disagreed and 25% strongly disagreed—believe the community was not engaged in local service delivery, while only 25% (15% agreed and 10% strongly agreed) feel that there is community involvement. The remaining 20% are neutral, which could be a sign of ignorance or a lack of awareness. This suggested that local people viewed the lack of community engagement as a key reason why service delivery is not vibrant or effective. It implied that citizens feel excluded from decision-making processes, which can lead to services that are poorly aligned with their needs, low levels of trust in local authorities and limited accountability. In essence, the data points to a disconnect between local governments and the communities they serve, highlighting the need for more inclusive and participatory approaches to improve service delivery outcomes.

### Policy and legal issues as determinants to service delivery

Policy and legal frameworks significantly influence local service delivery by defining the roles and responsibilities of local governments, determining how resources are allocated and shaping the level of autonomy they have in decision-making. When these frameworks are unclear or overly rigid, they can create confusion, limit flexibility and hinder the effective delivery of services. Additionally, weak accountability mechanisms within the legal system can allow corruption or mismanagement to persist, while laws that do not promote transparency and citizen participation can result in services that fail to meet local needs. Therefore, well-designed and properly enforced policy and legal frameworks are essential for efficient, responsive and accountable local service delivery.



**Figure 9: Policy and legal framework affect service delivery. Source: Researchers (2025)**

The responses indicate that a significant majority of respondents (59%)—30% disagreed and 29% strongly disagreed—believe that the policy and legal framework does not support effective local service delivery. Only 23% (13% agreed and 10% strongly agreed) view the framework as supportive, while 18% remained neutral. This suggests that many local people perceive weaknesses or gaps in the existing policies and laws as a major reason why service delivery is poorly perceived. It implies that the legal and institutional environment may lack clarity, enforcement or alignment with local needs, limiting the ability of local governments to operate efficiently, make decisions or be held accountable. Overall, the data reflects a public belief that systemic and structural issues within the policy and legal framework contribute to the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of local service delivery.

Situating findings within the research question, theoretical framework and existing literature The following sections integrate the study's findings with the central research question, the guiding theoretical framework and key contributions from the existing literature. This triangulated approach allows for a deeper understanding of how the results confirm, challenge or extend current knowledge. These connections are essential for showing that the research is not only methodologically sound but also meaningful, theoretically informed and part of an ongoing academic conversation.

### **Evaluating findings against the research question**

The research question was: what are the key determinants of poor service delivery in Zimbabwe's local government system? The findings of the survey provide a nuanced understanding of the key determinants of poor service delivery within Zimbabwe's local government system. Notably, the predominant public perception is that factors such as mismanagement, poor planning and lack of accountability are more critical to understanding service delivery failures than financial constraints. This diverges from conventional narratives that attribute service delivery challenges primarily to inadequate funding. The implication is that inefficiencies in governance processes, rather than resource scarcity, play a more significant role in shaping outcomes at the local government level. This perception underscores the importance of strengthening managerial capacity and oversight mechanisms to ensure that available resources are utilised efficiently and effectively.

Moreover, the results challenge the assumption that a shortage of skilled labour is a primary obstacle to effective local service delivery. Instead, the public views institutional weaknesses—such as corruption, poor planning and systemic mismanagement—as more salient issues. This perception aligns with broader governance literature that emphasises the corrosive effects of corruption and weak administrative frameworks on public service delivery. The emphasis on these governance failures suggests that technical capacity, while important, cannot compensate for a lack of integrity and operational discipline within local government structures. Thus, addressing service delivery challenges requires targeted reforms aimed at improving transparency, enforcing accountability and curbing malfeasance.

In addition, the survey highlighted the perceived impact of inadequate policy and legal frameworks, limited autonomy and low levels of civic participation on service delivery performance. These structural constraints are seen as major barriers to the responsiveness and effectiveness of local governments. The lack of meaningful public engagement in civic affairs, combined with insufficient decentralisation and legal support, contributes to a governance environment that is unresponsive to local needs and priorities. Therefore, any comprehensive strategy to enhance service delivery must incorporate institutional reforms that promote

decentralisation, strengthen legal and policy instruments and foster greater citizen involvement in governance processes. Such reforms would create a more enabling environment for accountable and responsive local governance in Zimbabwe.

### **Revisiting local government theory: Does proximity still matter?**

The survey findings raise fundamental questions about the efficacy of local government as a theory and system of governance. Decentralisation theory posits that local governments are better positioned than central authorities to deliver services effectively due to their closer proximity to citizens, presumed responsiveness to local needs and enhanced potential for participatory governance (Marumahoko, 2020; 2023). However, when empirical data reveals consistent failures in local service delivery—manifested in poor planning, mismanagement and a lack of accountability—these outcomes call into question the foundational assumptions of the model. Rather than functioning as responsive and efficient units, local governments in Zimbabwe appear to be constrained by structural and institutional weaknesses that compromise their performance and erode the legitimacy of decentralised governance.

Moreover, the assumption that proximity inherently fosters greater accountability and responsiveness is problematised by the observed public perceptions. While local governments are physically closer to the people, this does not automatically translate into better service outcomes. The survey data underscores that proximity without capacity, resources or political will can instead amplify public frustration. When local authorities are perceived as corrupt, disengaged or ineffective, their closeness to the community ceases to be an asset and becomes a liability. This disconnect between theoretical promise and practical reality suggests that the local government's institutional form may not be enough to deliver on its developmental mandate unless it is backed by functional autonomy, accountability mechanisms and citizen engagement platforms.

However, these findings should not be interpreted as a wholesale rejection of local government as a governance model. Rather, they highlight the urgent need for reform to align the practice of local governance with its theoretical ideals. Strengthening administrative and technical capacity, ensuring adequate and transparent funding mechanisms, and institutionalising accountability are critical to enhancing the effectiveness of local government. Additionally, fostering meaningful public participation and reinforcing the legal frameworks that support decentralisation are essential for restoring trust and improving performance. Thus, the challenge is not whether local government is a viable system, but how it can be reformed to fulfil its potential as the most accessible and democratically legitimate tier of governance.

### **Comparing and contrasting findings with literature**

The findings of this study resonate with, yet also challenge, key themes within the existing literature on local governance and service delivery. Scholars such as Rondinelli (1981) and Smoke (2003) have long argued that decentralisation improves service delivery by bringing government closer to the people, increasing responsiveness and tailoring solutions to local contexts. Similarly, Manor (1999) contends that local governments are better able to identify and respond to citizen needs due to their proximity and accessibility. However, the perceptions emerging from the survey in Zimbabwe contradict these optimistic assumptions. Rather than highlighting improved services, respondents emphasise mismanagement, poor planning and lack of accountability—suggesting that proximity alone is insufficient to ensure effectiveness. This supports critiques in the literature which caution that without adequate institutional

capacity and safeguards, decentralisation can simply devolve dysfunction (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999).

In contrast to the literature that emphasises capacity and fiscal autonomy as prerequisites for effective local governance (World Bank, 2000; Faguet, 2014), the survey results suggest that even in the presence of some decentralisation mechanisms, governance outcomes can still be poor if local institutions remain plagued by corruption and weak accountability structures. Scholars such as Crook and Manor (1998) and De Visser (2005) argue that successful decentralisation is conditional upon enabling frameworks that promote transparency, public participation and clearly defined responsibilities. The Zimbabwean case appears to reflect a failure of these conditions: while local government structures exist, they are not empowered or incentivised to perform effectively. Public dissatisfaction, as expressed in the survey, underscores the reality that institutional form without functional effectiveness leads to disillusionment with the very idea of local governance.

Nonetheless, the findings do not entirely refute the theoretical advantages of local governance but rather emphasise the gap between theory and practice. Literature by Shah and Thompson (2004) and Wunsch and Olowu (2000) acknowledges that decentralisation can yield developmental benefits, but only when accompanied by robust institutional support, political commitment and community engagement. The Zimbabwean context, as depicted in the findings, lacks these enabling factors, thus weakening the theoretical promise of local government. In this sense, the study affirms the literature's caution that decentralisation is not a panacea, but a governance strategy whose success is highly contingent on broader systemic reforms. Therefore, while the normative assumptions of local governance remain relevant, the Zimbabwean case illustrates how their realisation is deeply dependent on the presence of functional, accountable and well-resourced institutions.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The survey reveals a fragmented public perception of local government performance, with a significant number of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with the quality and responsiveness of services. This widespread discontent points to a deeper crisis of legitimacy and trust in local administrative institutions. Within the context of public administration, such perceptions reflect not only service delivery failures but also suggest systemic issues in how public institutions interface with citizens and respond to their needs. The findings raise important questions about the capacity of local governments to fulfil their mandate under conditions of limited public confidence.

The data underscores governance-related failures as central to poor service outcomes. Respondents identified corruption, lack of accountability, weak institutional autonomy, limited community participation and flawed legal and policy frameworks as the primary obstacles to effective local service delivery. These are not merely operational gaps but reflect deep institutional weaknesses that are well documented in public administration scholarship. The emphasis on accountability and civic engagement aligns with normative models of democratic governance, which argue that meaningful service improvements stem from enhancing transparency, citizen voice and institutional integrity—not just technical fixes. Thus, the findings reinforce the need for governance reforms that strengthen institutional legitimacy and responsiveness.

In contrast to traditional assumptions, the survey downplays the role of infrastructure underfunding and staffing shortages as principal causes of service delivery failure. While these factors are often cited in development planning, the public appears to attribute more weight to systemic administrative and governance challenges. This shift in perception carries significant implications for policy and practice in public administration. It suggests that increasing budgets or hiring more personnel may not yield substantial improvements unless accompanied by reforms that enhance institutional accountability and citizen participation. Ultimately, the results highlight the importance of viewing service delivery through a governance lens, where institutional design, rule of law and civic engagement are recognised as foundational to performance.

It is essential to strengthen governance and accountability mechanisms at the municipal level to improve the quality of local service delivery. Local governments should establish or reinforce independent audit committees tasked with monitoring service delivery budgets and expenditures to ensure greater financial transparency. In addition, adopting performance-based management systems that directly link service delivery outcomes to staff appraisals can help instill a results-oriented culture. Transparency should also be supported by creating publicly accessible digital platforms where citizens can track the progress of service delivery projects, including timelines and budget allocations. These initiatives should be championed by local councils, internal audit units and oversight bodies, with implementation beginning within the next 6 to 12 months.

Enhancing community engagement is equally critical. Local authorities must institutionalise regular, structured avenues for public participation, such as quarterly town hall meetings, to gather community input on local planning and service priorities. Moreover, user-friendly mobile or online tools should be developed to allow residents to report service issues, submit suggestions and receive feedback from local officials. Building the capacity of municipal staff in participatory planning, inclusive dialogue and conflict-sensitive facilitation will further reinforce these efforts. These steps should be rolled out in phases, starting with pilot projects and scaling up within a year, in partnership with civil society organisations and community-based groups.

In summary, meaningful reform of the legal and policy frameworks governing local administration is necessary to support autonomy and effectiveness. This involves reviewing decentralisation laws and clarifying the division of roles and responsibilities between national and local governments to reduce overlaps and confusion. Intergovernmental coordination bodies should be established or strengthened to promote coherent service planning and implementation. Furthermore, local governments must be empowered with predictable and equitable fiscal transfers based on transparent allocation criteria such as population size or levels of need. These policy-level interventions, which require collaboration between the national legislatures, the ministry of local government, local government councils and policy think tanks, should be prioritised for review within the next 12 months and enacted through legislative amendments within two to three years.

### **Areas for further study**

Future research should investigate the role of political culture and leadership in shaping service delivery outcomes. Specifically, examining local political dynamics—such as patronage networks, leadership styles and the degree of political accountability—could offer deeper insights into the non-technical barriers that constrain service reform. This line of inquiry is

particularly valuable for understanding how informal institutions interact with formal governance structures, often with significant implications for policy implementation and institutional performance.

Another critical area for further study is the institutional dynamics of local government autonomy. Research should explore how the distribution of power and resources between central and local governments influences service delivery outcomes. Comparative case studies across municipalities with varying levels of autonomy could shed light on the structural conditions that enable or impede effective governance at the local level.

Additionally, there is a need to examine how public perceptions of corruption, accountability and government performance shape citizen behaviour—particularly in areas such as participation in local governance, tax compliance and institutional trust. Employing mixed-method research designs that combine surveys, focus groups and experimental approaches could yield a more nuanced understanding of these behavioural dynamics and inform strategies for strengthening state–society relations.

## References

Afrobarometer. (2020). Citizen engagement in Zimbabwe at lowest level in a decade.

Agrawal, A & Ribot, J. (1999). Accountability in decentralisation: A framework with South Asian and West African Cases. *The Journal of Developing Areas*, 33(4), 473–502.

Chigwata, T. C. & Marumahoko, S. (2018). Intergovernmental planning and budgeting in Zimbabwe: learning the lessons of the past. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, (20), 172-186. <https://doi.org/10.5130/cjlg.v0i20.6140>

Commonwealth Local Government Forum. (2021). Digital transformation of Zimbabwe local government. Retrieved from <https://www.clgf.org.uk/whats-new/news/digital-transformation-of-zimbabwe-local-government/>

Crook, R. C. & Manor, J. (1998). Democracy and decentralisation in South Asia and West Africa: Participation, accountability and performance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

De Visser, J. (2005). Developmental local government: A case study of South Africa. Oxford: Hart Publishing.

eBusiness Weekly. (2025). Poor public finance management haunts local authorities. Retrieved from <https://www.businessweekly.co.zw/poor-public-finance-management-haunts-local-authorities/>

Faguet, J-P. (2014). Decentralisation and governance. *World Development*, 53, 2–13. ResearchGate+5en.wikipedia.org+5

Good Governance Africa. (2024). Manipulating local government for political ends. Retrieved from <https://gga.org/manipulating-local-government-for-political-ends/>

Machingauta, N. (2016). Central-local government relations: Implications on the autonomy and discretion of Zimbabwe's local government. Longdom Open Access. Retrieved from <https://www.longdom.org/open-access/centrallocal-government-relations-implications-on-the-autonomy-and-discretion-of-zimbabwe8217s-local-government-34354.html>

Manor, J. (1999). The political economy of democratic decentralisation. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

Marumahoko, S. (2020). A conceptual framework for improved municipal service delivery in urban Zimbabwe. *Applied Research in Administrative Sciences*. 1(2/December 2020): 24-36.

Marumahoko, S. (2023). Central-local relations in Zimbabwe. Does the local matter? *Croatian and Comparative Public Administration*, 23 (3): 411-431.

Marumahoko, S., Afolabi, O.S., Sadie, Y and Nhede, N.T. (2020). Governance and urban service delivery in Zimbabwe. *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 42(1): 41-68.

Mlambo, N. (2023). The relationship between corruption and service delivery: The case of Zimbabwe. *Zimbabwe Briefing*. Retrieved from <https://www.zimbabwebriefing.org/single-post/the-relationship-between-corruption-and-service-delivery-the-case-of-zimbabwe>

Mlambo, N. (2023). The relationship between corruption and service delivery: The case of Zimbabwe. *Zimbabwe Briefing*. Retrieved from <https://www.zimbabwebriefing.org/single-post/the-relationship-between-corruption-and-service-delivery-the-case-of-zimbabwe>

Mupandanyama, T. (2023). Corruption in Urban Councils and its Impact on Service Delivery. *Zimbabwe Open University*. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372680584\\_Corruption\\_in\\_Urban\\_Councils\\_and\\_its\\_Impact\\_on\\_Service\\_Delivery](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372680584_Corruption_in_Urban_Councils_and_its_Impact_on_Service_Delivery)

Nyikadzino, M. and Nhema, A. (2016). A critical analysis of the dynamics of intergovernmental relations in Zimbabwe. *Longdom Open Access*. Retrieved from <https://www.longdom.org/open-access/a-critical-analysis-of-the-dynamics-of-intergovernmental-relations-in-zimbabwe-37248.html>

Rondinelli, D. A. (1981). Administrative decentralisation and economic development: The Sudan's experiment with devolution. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 19(4), 595–624.

Shah, A, and Thompson, T. (2004). Implementing decentralised local governance: A treacherous road with Potholes, Detours and Road Closures. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 3353*, Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23549693\\_Implementing\\_Decentralised\\_Local\\_Governance\\_A\\_Treacherous\\_Road\\_with\\_Potholes\\_Detours\\_and\\_Road\\_Closures](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23549693_Implementing_Decentralised_Local_Governance_A_Treacherous_Road_with_Potholes_Detours_and_Road_Closures)

Smoke, P. (2003) Decentralisation in Africa: Goals, dimensions, myths and challenges. *Public Administration and Development*, 23 (1), 7–16. Wiley Online Library, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.255>.

United Zimbabwe Alliance. (2024). Transparency and Accountability in Local Govt. Retrieved from <https://unitedzimbabwe.org/blog/Transparency-and-Accountability/>

World Bank. (2000). *World Development Report 1999/2000: Entering the 21st century: The changing role of the state*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

Wunsch, J. S., and Olowu, D. (2000). *The failure of the centralised state: Institutions and self-governance in Africa*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000.