



Research Article:

Corruption in Non-Governmental Organisations and its Impact for Development Projects in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Just like any other developing country, post-colonial Zimbabwe has seen an influx of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) whose vision and goals are to foster sustainable development in both urban and rural areas. Despite the concerted efforts, not much has been achieved in terms of sustainable development projects in spite of the enormous financial resources that have been allocated to various NGOs in the country. A closer look at the situation reveals that corruption is one of the vices that have contributed to failure of development projects in Zimbabwe. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to examine the dimensions of corruption in NGOs in Zimbabwe and how it has impacted on development projects. The paper further proffers solutions to dealing with corruption as a way of improving the sustainability of development projects to foster sustainable development. The paper is informed by a wide evidently base which encompasses data obtained through participatory observation, focus group discussions, interviews, and secondary research. For ethical reasons, the names of NGOs that have been used as case studies for this paper will not be revealed.

Keywords: *corruption, NGOs, development projects, sustainable development, Zimbabwe*

Introduction

Rampant corruption in NGOs in Zimbabwe is a worrisome phenomenon that has dire implications for sustainable development in the country. Yet in the Zimbabwean context NGOs are perceived as the epitome of development due to their association and preoccupation with development related projects. Consequently, corrupt activities prevalent in NGOs have not attracted the attention of relevant entities including the government,

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donors, and anti-corruption stakeholders. To this end, it is the purpose of this paper to examine the dimensions of corruption in NGOs in Zimbabwe and how it has affected development projects as well as sustainable development in the country.

Regardless of the proliferation of NGO development projects in post-colonial Zimbabwe, not much has been achieved in terms of the success of such projects. While this may be debatable, there is little doubt that a lot could have been achieved had it not been for corruption. Furthermore, given the enormous financial resources assigned by donor for development projects run by NGOs in Zimbabwe, it can be argued that much development could have been achieved especially in rural areas. Though development is difficult to measure, food security could have been achieved from poultry and garden projects, health security and socio-economic development among others could have materialised had it not been for corruption in NGOs.

A conceptual overview of corruption

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines corruptions as ‘dishonest or illegal behavior especially by powerful people’ For Altbach (2004) it as an ‘impairment of integrity, virtue, or moral principle...inducement to wrong by improper or unlawful means.’ However, it is important to outline from the onset that one needs to separate some acts of mere incompetence and inadequacies by some actors and those that fall under corrupt practices. According to Miynt (2000), corruption is defined:

As the use of public office for private gain, or in other words, use of official position, rank, or status by an office bearer for his own personal benefit. Following from this definition, examples of corrupt behaviour would include: (a) bribery, (b) extortion, (c) fraud, (d) embezzlement, (e) nepotism, (f) cronyism, (g) appropriation of public assets and property for private use, and(h) influence peddling.

Sall differentiates between what is:

Termed "according to rule" corruption and "against the rule". Facilitation payments, where a bribe is paid to receive preferential treatment for something that the bribe receiver is required to do by law, constitute the former. The latter, on the other hand, is a bribe paid to obtain services from the bribe receiver is prohibited from providing.

As Chigora and Guzura (2009) argue, in other words corruption denotes the abuse of power or authority vested in an office for personal gain it includes subversion of public interest by personal interest or to be simple. In the context of this paper, corruption denotes dishonesty in handling financial resources and projects in NGOs by management staff and other workers. Additionally, Larche (1999) notes that corruption is a sensitive issue in the NGO world. Substantially he also notes the factors responsible for corruption in humanitarian operations and these include the following: lack of planning, the number of humanitarian actors which has increased exponentially over the years and the financial resources at stake. Moreover, he



also observes that corruption exists in both developed and developing countries. In agreement, Muurlink and Match (2020) also note that corruption is one of the most destructive and pervasive wicked problems present in commercial enterprises, governmental agencies, and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). Furthermore, they argue that research on corruption in the context of NGOs in developing countries is scarce. However, NGO Watchdog argues that the exact scale of corruption in NGOs is difficult to determine, but it is assumed to be at much lower levels than that happening in the private commercial sector.

Furthermore, NGO Watchdog also notes three types of corruption in NGOs, and they are as follows; Contextual' which is corruption is linked to the environment surrounding the intervention (corrupt regimes, governments, police forces). 'Systemic' corruption, which refers to the humanitarian system, with its multiple, interacting, and interdependent actors. 'Intra-organizational' corruption is linked to the constraints inherent within each NGO (human resources, active prevention strategies against corruption risks, verification procedures). Thus, while NGOs have little hope of eradicating contextual corruption, they can and should take steps to prevent or address corruption within their own organizations.

A brief overview of corruption in NGOs in Zimbabwe

Post-colonial Zimbabwe has witnessed the influx of development oriented international NGOs and donor funded projects in both urban and rural areas. The proliferation of NGOs in the country has taken a paradigm shift with the establishment of local NGOs that share the same objectives with their international counterparts and get funding from international donors. In spite of efforts by donors to monitor the development projects that they fund, the rate of corruption in NGOs in Zimbabwe has increased at an alarming rate. While it may appear difficult to ascertain the extent of corruption in NGOs, the magnitude of the embezzlement of development funds, production of fake project reports, existence of non-existent project personnel and entrenchment of individual interests is deeply rooted in the operation of NGOs in Zimbabwe. It suffices to highlight that these dimensions of corruption in NGOs are intricate to notice and believe unless one observes them through participation.

Even though some donors and mother NGOs have instituted mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation of projects, majority of local NGO management and personnel have thrived on resources misappropriated from financial resources meant for development projects. In many cases, establishing an NGO under the guise of aiming to promote development appears to have become a lucrative enterprise for some individuals. While this may sound farfetched and unfounded, the findings of this paper suggest otherwise.

Moreover, Transparency International Zimbabwe (TIZ) notes that corruption often thrives during times of crisis. A study carried out by TIZ on corruption risks and vulnerabilities in social protection and humanitarian aid with a focus on the Cyclone Idai Chimanmani (2019) and Cholera pandemic in Harare (Budiro and Glenview in 2018) revealed massive corruption and abuse of funds and aid from well-wishers by those who had the responsibility to distribute the aid (Transparency International, 2020). At this juncture, it suffices to explore the dimensions of corruption in NGOs in Zimbabwe.



The history of NGOs in Zimbabwe

Makumbe (1998) notes that for most of Africa, civil society would include trade unions, professional associations, church and Para-church organizations, resident, student, business and other special interest associations, the media, and various types of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Makumbe (1998) also argues that even though civil society seemed to pursue an anti-state agenda, the truth is between the late 1980s and early 1990s, its major preoccupation was the fight of the masses against unjust rule by governments.

Civil society in Zimbabwe emerged in the mid-nineties. As such, Gumbo (2002) notes the challenges being faced by the civic movement in Zimbabwe. These include that the government will by all means do everything to maintain political power and to contain the civic movement for example by arresting and imprisoning activists who take part in the civic activities, reliance of the mass support base of the MDC, and donor funding that comes attached to conditions suitable to the donors not the grassroots.

Dimensions of corruption in NGOs in Zimbabwe and implications on development projects

Although the dimensions of corruption in NGOs in Zimbabwe may vary, a trend exists in the manner in which they financial resources are misappropriated. This is largely attributable to human nature, organizational deficiencies, and failure to provide frameworks for corporate good governance.

It should be noted that NGOs are run by humans who according to the realist theory are by nature self-centred and always motivated by the desire to survival above all else, hence, they become selfish even in their operating NGOs. Research has shown that NGOs are interest driven with the ultimate aim of survival of individuals running them. NGOs in Zimbabwe have niche areas, however as they are established, they are meant to address and redress certain development related issues as well as their personal problems. Thus, there is now manipulation of development work to access a large portion of donor funds. They appear to be more individualistic and not concerned with the greater good. Participatory observation revealed that in many cases, people start NGOs based on the hot top agenda issues of the moment, which may not necessarily be problems in their target areas, with the objective of receiving donor funds which they will misappropriate for their personal use. This then explains why humanitarian aid and development projects have in some cases failed to address development issues in communities.

At this point, it is important to mention some of the issues which emanated from the study carried out by Transparency International Zimbabwe (TIZ) on corruption risks and vulnerabilities in social protection and humanitarian aid initiatives with a focus on the cyclone Idai (Chimanimani, 2018) and cholera pandemic in Harare (Budiro and Glenview, 2019). The issues included the following dimensions of corruption:

1. The vulnerable being forced to bribe officials (extortion and kickbacks) to get aid.



2. Sextortion and sexual abuse of women officials distributing aid, abuse mostly of women to gain sexual favours in return for aid.
3. Patronage- only those belonging to certain political parties benefiting from the aid.
4. Manipulation of regulations in the distribution of aid (bias and favouritism)
5. Influence-peddling (favour-brokering and conflicts of interest)
6. Flouting procurement regulations and inflating prices of aid commodities (Transparency International, 2020).

While NGOs are the watchdog of the government, the question is who watches over them? The general idea is that they are closely monitored by the donors who avail funds for their projects. Research has revealed that these organizations allow donors to see only what they want them to see. An anonymous source who works for an NGO described how they would rush preparing for the donors' monitoring visit, invite only those whom they knew would not expose the project was not properly implemented and prepare reports with falsified information. The research also revealed that even though NGOs are audited, sometimes the process is manipulated to reveal the desirable results. Participatory observation in one local NGO revealed that financial books and records are sometimes fabricated to suit the requirements of the audit.

In their nature NGOs are non-profit making organizations, but the lifestyles of their employees give a different view, especially the Directors and the Finance Officers. Research has shown that the top management send their children to expensive private schools, and they live in the less populated and expensive low-density areas. The mismanagement of funds in NGOs is alarming yet they masquerade as the watchdog of the government. One anonymous respondent spoke about how funds would be vivamented from one grant to another to cover deficits in project implementation, yet every project should be managed through its appropriate grant. In addition, one anonymous respondent who is a project manager in an NGO testified that she has not gotten her full salary since last year in June, but she knows that there are provisions of their full salaries from the main donor which the organization receives every month.

Research also showed that a number of unaware villagers have been made to sign documents that would not have been explained to them. These documents have been discovered to be false or additional claims of money by the project teams which they put into their own pockets. Hence, some villagers expressed anger and confessed that they sometimes forfeit. However, some of them alleged that there are incentives which they are given for signing those papers whose content they would not be aware of such as money (\$1), t- shirts or media material (fliers, stickers, and posters) that is why they just sign.

Participant observation has revealed that employees claim field trip funds for work they will never do and even account for the funds with receipts which project directors will approve. From a face value, it would appear as if the directors and managers would have been given receipts that could have been obtained by fraudulent means without their knowledge or counterfeit ones. In reality, those responsible for budgetary issues and directing and managing projects will be in the know in relation to the abuse of funds. This is because the whole organisation's personnel will be benefitting from the abuse and misuse of development



funds as they usually work as a team. The implications of such corrupt activities have been the short-changing of development projects that would have been used as justification to secure funding from donors. However, this is not may the case with NGOs administered by funders who usually put in place accounting, auditing, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The phenomenon is more prevalent in local NGOs.

Apart from claiming for undone work, in some cases trips are unnecessarily scheduled for the purpose of exhausting petty cash. In such case, genuine projects could be operational, but the workers will be, as a team, unnecessarily visiting projects sites with the objective of accessing money for their personal benefit. In many instances, the management will be aware of such shenanigans, but could not restrain since they will be part of the corrupt cohort. In so doing, they will be wasting funds that could be used for the success of development projects for their selfish benefits. This is prevalent even in international NGOs. Accounting and auditing for such funds will be easy and unsuspecting since evidence that the project site could have visited would be availed.

The issue of planning research for personal purposes is another dimension of corruption prevalent in especially local NGOs in Zimbabwe. This is usually the case with top NGO management personnel who will be furthering their studies. In such cases, their masters or doctoral research will be construed as research projects for community development such that research funding proposals would be designed in such a manner that resembles development projects falling within the criteria of donor funding. Upon receiving the funding, the resources will be used for the benefit of the person doing his or her own research with the knowledge of other workers who will be given kickbacks to buy their silence. In the end, the funds will be accounted as if they were used in a development project. The concomitant implications of such practices are obvious; resources donated for development projects would be used for the benefit of few corrupt individuals.

The most unorthodox means of misappropriating project resources in NGOs in Zimbabwe is the creation of 'ghost beneficiaries. In the context of this research, 'ghost beneficiaries' are beneficiaries of development assistance who do not exist at all. From data gathered for this research, two separate NGOs in Harare that operate independent of each other have a tendency of drafting project proposals whose intended beneficiaries do not exist. The objective of such chicanery is to attract financial resources from donors; the resource which would never be utilised for development projects. Had such funds directed towards development projects, a lot could or could have been achieved in terms of sustainable development in Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, the existence of ghost workers in NGO payrolls has been an approach used by management of these organisations to extort financial resources from their donors. This is prevalent largely in local based NGOs whose accountability to their donors is not comprehensive as they are usually not subjected to vigorous monitoring and auditing measures. By coming with lists of ghost workers, the organisations will then develop payrolls that accommodate such non-existent workers whose remunerations will be channelled towards the bank accounts of the management. This short-changes funds that could be used in development projects to achieve sustainable development. While such practices are



difficulty to unearth, participant observation has revealed these maleficent practices that have negatively impacted on sustainable development in Zimbabwe.

Moreover, the management of one local NGO in Harare is in the habit of inflating the remuneration of its workers for the benefit of the top management. According to an anonymous respondent who works at the NGO, the salary she receives is far less than the figure that appears on the salary sheet which the organisation sends to donors as its wage bill. The respondent underscores that the rest of the money is shared among the director and other top management personnel. The respondent maintained that, even though she is aware of being short-changed by the organisation, there is nothing she can do because exposing the corruption would result in her being relieved of her duties, which is a nightmare given the rate of unemployment in the country. There is no doubt that such unfair treatment demotivates the workers. Be that as it may, development projects are the ones that suffer from such misappropriation of funds which could motivate the workforce to work in the best interests of development.

More so, the tendency to initiate development projects that serve the home areas of those at the helm of NGO leadership is rife in local NGOs in Zimbabwe. There is a case of a Harare based NGO whose director decided to have a poultry project funded by donors to help the poor diverted to his mothers' home. The proceeds from the poultry were supposed to be used to pay school fees for orphan and vulnerable children in rural areas, but the family of the director became the beneficiaries of the project. One of the researchers of this paper who was a participant observer in the case underscored the way in which the donors from Europe who had requested to visit the project site and meet the beneficiaries were lied to. A stage-managed visit to a certain rural area was made and some children were made to appear as if they had benefited from the poultry project. One can see that such practices negatively affect the realisation of development. Even if it's a single instance of corruption, assisting a few school pupils could have gone a long way in achieving development in the sense of capacity development of the children. It is therefore imperative that some measures be taken to minimise corruption in the NGO sector in Zimbabwe.

Solutions to corruption in NGOs

A lot needs to be done to minimise corruption in NGOs in Zimbabwe. While it may be noble to eradicate the vice, it is impossible to completely eliminate it. However, measures can be put in place to reduce the rate of corruption so as to promote the success of development projects to achieve sustainable development.

First and foremost, the government ministry that registers NGO should provide mechanisms for monitoring corruption in these private organisations. In the Zimbabwean context, registration of NGOs is done through the Department of Social Welfare of the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare (Non-Governmental Organisations Act, Nd: 9). The ministry should device mechanisms that promote the accountability of NGOs. Even though the government should have limited association with private organisations, there must an exception when it comes to issues of corruption.



Furthermore, the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) must with immediate effect audit the management and other workers in NGOs. According to Section 13 (a) of the Anti-Corruption Commission Act, ZACC is mandated among other things 'to monitor and examine the practices, systems, and procurement procedures of public and private institutions' (Anti-Corruption Commission Act, 2004: Chapter 9: 22). Hence, it falls within the ambit of the responsibilities of ZACC to probe NGOs for corruption. Surprisingly, corruption is going unchecked in NGOs as the anticorruption body is largely preoccupied with political witch hunting exercises as evidenced in its unprocedural indictment of Zimbabwe's Higher Education Minister, Jonathan Moyo, who is believed to be opposing the presidency of the Vice President, Emmerson Mnangagwa. The Commission should be apolitical and concentrate on dealing with corruption including in NGOs.

More so, donors must provide mechanisms for monitoring beneficiaries of development projects and the sustainability of development projects as well as social activities. Even though it appears to be a mammoth task because some donors based in their mother countries will be rarely visiting project sites and meet beneficiaries of the resources they provide, making efforts to visit project sites and meet beneficiaries of development projects will go a long way in minimising the misappropriation of funds. Instead of relying on fake project reports, distorted photos of beneficiaries and non-existent budgets, donors should make frantic efforts to monitor the development projects they fund.

Moreover, punishment mechanisms that focus on restorative justice including ensuring that the looted resources are returned, for example, attaching and auctioning properties of culprits could go a long way in restraining corruption in NGOs. Even though this may be difficult to execute, such measures are necessary in reducing corruption in private organisations.

Project reporting procedures in NGOs should also be enhanced to improve transparency and accountability. Even though there is no guarantee that NGOs will produce authentic projects, mechanisms could be put in place to curb the phenomenon of distorted reporting. Such mechanisms include vigorous follow-ups on development projects by responsible authorities or donors to ascertain the existence of projects reported on. However, there is doubt that some donors could be conniving with NGO management and workers to minimise misappropriation of financial resources. In such cases it will be difficult to promote transparency and accountability in private organisations. Be that as it may, it is imperative to institute comprehensive reporting procedures to control corruption in NGOs in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the paper concludes that corruption is rampant in NGOs in Zimbabwe. The problem of corruption is especially prevalent in local NGOs whose transparency and accountability mechanisms are marred by laxity on the part of NGO management and inadequate monitoring by donors in most cases are who are based overseas. The most prevalent dimension of corruption in Zimbabwe is related misappropriation. Other dimensions of corruption prevalent in NGOs in Zimbabwe including distorting budgets, submission of fake project proposals, claiming funds for no-existent projects and beneficiaries



among others are meant to misappropriate funds. The misuse and abuse of financial resources meant for development projects has negative implications for sustainable development.

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