

Implementation of Strategic Plans by Zimbabwean Local Authorities: A Case of Nyanga Rural District Council

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Abstract

The local government of Zimbabwe adopted and introduced strategic planning to local authorities in the years 1997 to 1998. Local authorities are therefore expected to formulate and implement strategic plans. The significance of this study is to highlight the reasons behind failure by local authorities to implement strategic plans. The research focuses on determining if strategic planning by local authorities leads to successful strategy implementation, furthermore it aims to assess if strategic plans are being implemented and establish the challenges that are faced by local authorities in executing strategic plans. Finally, it seeks to determine whether successful implementation ensures efficient and effective service delivery. The study used interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions as primary sources and council records as secondary data to establish that a number of challenges hinder the implementation process. The challenges fit in the categories of political, economic, and legislative elements. These revelations show that there is a gap between planning and implementation and cast considerable doubt on whether Zimbabwean local authorities are capacitated to implement strategic plans. Among the solutions are that council chambers should not be used as political battle fields at the expense of planning to improve service delivery, there is need to revise the legislations that guide the operations of local authorities, the central government needs to increase financial support to local authorities and that stakeholders be involved throughout the process to ensure successful implementation.

Keywords: strategic plans, strategy implementation, service delivery, participation.

INTRODUCTION

Local authorities are small democratic units which were created to spur democratic participation to citizens in matters that affect their daily lives, Vosloo et al (1974). The Zimbabwean central government anticipated that planning strategically was going to bring an end to poor service provision and see the dawn of quality service provision from the country's local authorities therefore increasing stakeholder expectations; this led to the introduction of strategic planning by local authorities. To this end, through Section 10 of the Regional, Town and Country Planning Act Chapter (29:12), Zimbabwean Urban and Rural District Councils were accorded planning authority status by the central government. Urban and Rural Councils prepare plans for their areas, they are therefore regarded as "planning authorities" Zimbabwe Institute Local Government Paper 0506 (2006:6).

Nyanga Rural District Council (NRDC) which is the case study in this research is located right on the hem of the Zimbabwe and Mozambique border stretching for about 100 km along the border. It is composed of 31 wards divided to form two constituencies namely the Southern and Northern constituencies. It touches

boundaries with three other rural district councils namely Mutasa, Makoni and Mudzi RDCs. The local authority is located 120 km away from the capital of Manicaland, Mutare. Nyanga Rural District Council was formed after the amalgamation process of Nyanga District and Nyanga Rural Councils in 1993 through the Rural District Councils Act of 1988.

The local authority has in place a 10 year strategic plan 2013 to 2022 which was approved in May 2012. This strategic plan for the period 2013-2022 is largely based on the first five-year District Strategic Plan which expired in 2011. It is also stated in the current strategic plan that most of the planned projects in the 2007 to 2011 Nyanga District Strategic Plan remained unimplemented. For this reason, this ten year Strategic Plan for Nyanga District draws most of its contents from the first district strategic plan, NRDC 2013-2022 Strategic Plan (2012).

The planning process is a culmination of a number of phases and activities to be completed in identifying with a given objective. It is a process of assessing where an organization is presently, ascertaining the challenges and opportunities that present themselves, and determining what destination is most desirable

and how to get there. This means that it is a process of crafting a strategy. Strategy implementation is an integral component of the strategic management process and is viewed as the “process that turns the formulated strategy into a series of actions and then results to ensure that the vision, mission, strategy and strategic objectives of the organisation are successfully achieved as planned”, Thompson & Strickland (2003:365). However, successful implementation depends on total commitment and effective participation of everyone involved as to what has to be done and to their understanding of why it should be accomplished. Effective implementation of strategic plans helps fill the gap between planning and achieving the desired organizational outcomes thus impacting on the organizational mission and vision. By conducting this research, the researchers aim to provide indispensable knowledge to local government practitioners and researchers who are interested in implementation of strategies by the public sector.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Most Zimbabwean local authorities are producing strategic plans; however service delivery has not improved, this indicates inadequate implementation of strategic plans. There has been persistent failure by local authorities to translate their strategic plans into operational actions.

Challenges Faced in Implementation of Strategies

There are various challenges that hinder implementation of strategies by Zimbabwean local authorities. They may be internal or external to the organization concerned. Kangoro (1998:303) states that “the lack of commitment to strategic management practises by top management and other members of the organization results in poor implementation.” In local authorities there are half hearted efforts made towards ensuring successful implementation this has led to poor service delivery as effective and efficient service delivery are linked to the successful implementation of strategies. Full commitment by all involved is a prerequisite for implementation. For strategy implementation to occur there is need for organizational change.

Musyoka (2011) says that “strategy implementation is inextricably connected to organizational change” If members of an organization resist change and maintain the status quo, implementation will not take place. The sources of this resistance are varied but they yield unsatisfactory implementation results. Resources in any form, whether they are financial, human (in skills or experience that they contribute to implementation), equipment and buildings, are a prerequisite for successful implementation, inadequacy of any one or all of the resources poses a stumbling block to implementation efforts. The operating environment in which local authorities find

themselves in poses challenges to their implementation efforts. The dynamic technological environment implies that organisations have to keep abreast with changes in the technological environment, as use of technology, in particular computers, makes the job easier and faster. Failure to adopt use of computers slows down the implementation efforts. The political-legal environment poses challenges to implementation as new laws and policies have to be taken into consideration by the local government institution. Musyoka (2011) asserts that any unanticipated changes in government policies will affect the strategy implementation process either positively or negatively. Local government institutions are creatures of statute therefore they are guided by the various pieces of legislation such as the Urban Councils’ Act Chapter (29:15), the Rural District Councils’ (RDC) Act Chapter (29:13) and the Regional, Town and Country Planning Act Chapter (29:12), they have to abide by what is set out in the respective acts. The policy formulators in local authorities include councillors from different political parties; the representatives of the political parties have to reach a consensus when they formulate policies that will enable implementation unfortunately political polarisation that exists in Zimbabwean local authorities hampers implementation efforts. Economic changes in the macro environment may hinder implementation; they include current incomes, prices, savings, credit availability, and any change in the direction of economies. Musyoka (2011) says that the economic changes will affect the financial performance of an organization. They therefore have to be borne in mind to ensure effective implementation. Stakeholders have an important role that they play in the implementation process therefore their participation is important. Their exclusion could pose challenges that impair any implementation efforts that the organization has planned.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Nyanga District, it focused on 3 wards in the district namely wards 5, 10 and 20. The findings obtained were generalized to other wards. The study was conducted from April 2012 to January 2013. A population that consisted of the District Administrator, traditional leaders, councillors, council employees (both managerial and non-managerial employees), nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), government departments and some general residents was selected as informants. The study was qualitative in nature and its data collection was mostly based on data obtained from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included interviews, focus group discussions and open ended questionnaires while the secondary sources were council minutes and reports. The questionnaires were distributed to government

departments, NGOs and non managerial employees. These questionnaires were meant to gather information on whether strategy implementation is taking place and if there are any hindrances to implementation of strategies. The interviews were directed at the policy makers who include the councillors of the wards mentioned above, the council chairperson, the District Administrator and the management team, the traditional leaders such as the Chief and the VIDCO representatives. Focus group discussions were used to elicit responses from the residents of the selected wards. They were conducted in order to obtain first hand information on the issue at hand and to see if the planning is participatory in nature and whether they are satisfied with service delivery. Secondary data sources such as newspapers, council records pertaining to the NRDC strategic plan, its history and vital statistics which were obtained from council minutes and reports motivated this study, a considerable amount of information has been written on inadequate implementation of plans. The researchers wanted to obtain first hand information on the situation that is prevailing in the district.

LIMITATION OF RESEARCH

The major limitations to the research are that NRDC's operations are not posted on its website. The researchers had to make frequent visits to Nyanga so as to get information for the research. Furthermore some of the respondents were not willing to volunteer information due to fear of victimisation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

NRDC does not involve all its stakeholders right from formulation to monitoring and evaluation. It however involves NGOs as evidenced by the informants from NGOs who said that they are involved at the formulation and implementation stages. The reason for NGOs being involved may be that they are implementing partners and provide financial resources for some of the projects/activities in the plan. The remaining informants with the exception of the residents responded that they are involved throughout the process. However, the residents highlighted that they are not involved in the planning process at the lowest levels viz at village or ward level. They said that they are aware that there is representation at various levels however, the meetings are not held regularly in their respective villages and wards.

RDCs should be guided by the "bottom up" planning system introduced by the Prime Minister's Declaration (1984 & 1985) so that they conduct community based planning. This declaration outlined organisational structures for participation by stakeholders in planning. It provided a basis for a hierarchy of representative bodies at village, ward, district and provincial levels. At each level there is

overseeing and prioritisation of local needs until they reach the Provincial Development Committee, Stewart et al (1994). The implications of this declaration for rural district councils are that there should be participation at all levels to ensure successful implementation of strategic plans. This process is supposed to show the participatory structure that is promoted by the local government system in Zimbabwe as indicated by this declaration where village representatives and councillors represent the people who voted for them by taking their needs to council. According to Chakaipa (2010:22) 'this directive brought on stream village and ward development committees to streamline and focus bottom up planning and development.' However, the situation prevailing on the ground is different as the residents indicated from their responses that they are not involved in the planning process, they described it as a "top down affair". This has resulted in projects that do not meet local needs and priorities. As evidenced by responses from the residents, the WADCO meetings are not being held due to political polarisation. Despite the existence of a Rural District Development Committee as provided for in Section 60 of the Rural District Councils' Act Chapter 29:13.

Strategic planning aims to improve service delivery through better decisions due to a clearer direction and a unified vision. This entails that improved service delivery is at the heart of successful implementation of strategic plans. However, basing on the findings, service delivery has not improved since the local authority engaged in the use of strategic plans in May 2007. Strategic planning has not produced significant changes to service delivery at the local authority; the service recipients said service delivery has been poor since the formation of the district. The informants were of the view that the results of strategic planning are poor as they see no change in provision of services by the local authority. An interview with the DA revealed that management and staff at the local authority do not demonstrate full commitment in ensuring effective and efficient service delivery in the district; this is evidenced by the apparent half hearted efforts that are made towards implementation of the plan. Attention was brought to the 2007-2011 strategic plan which was inadequately implemented. The informant blamed maintenance of the status quo and resistance to new strategies of implementing for the inadequate implementation of this strategic plan and said that this has led to the poor service delivery that residents are receiving. A willingness to adopt change would enable implementation of strategies. Local authorities must appreciate the dynamic environment in which they are operating and change their status quo.

Lack of financial resources is one of the major challenges that have threatened the successful

implementation of strategic plans in Zimbabwean local authorities. Even though they have sources of revenue like user charges and levies, collection of such revenue is difficult. People are not willing to remit payments to council; they have always voiced concerns on the state of service delivery as opposed to the amounts of money which they are required to pay Gukurume (2011). They feel that the amounts charged do not match the poor services to which they are exposed. There is a problem of centralisation as indicated by PlanAfric (2000), the failure by the government to decentralise control over resources that are needed for implementation hampers efforts, resources are controlled by the centre and allocated through sectoral agencies, linking projects and programs with area plans and priorities is difficult hence inadequate implementation. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the planning process appears not be taking into consideration the issue of availability of resources, this has resulted in over ambitious plans which are not linked to the budget and the availability of resources. Informants revealed that NRDC has a limited number of computers, the CEO lamented that inadequate computers within the organization have hampered their implementation efforts. In order to finance implementation, the local authority should engage in income generating activities as provided for in Section 80 of the Rural District Councils' Act Chapter 29:13, this will enable it to raise the much needed financial resources. This would also enable NRDC to purchase the required computers.

Chigwenya (2010:188) says that "decentralization of local authorities has been curtailed by the heavy presence of the government's hand in all sectors as it continues to interfere with the day to day running of local authorities." As evidenced by the information collected, politics has threatened the implementation of strategic plans. NRDC has encountered challenges in trying to implement the strategic plans because it is made up of councillors who are affiliated to different political parties. Councillors who are aligned to the same political party rarely disagree on issues; problems arise when an agreement is to be made by councillors from different political parties. The fact that the idea is from the opposition party cumulates in unfruitful arguments. At the end of the day no decision is made.

Local authorities are bound by legislation on the issue of handling debtors, the informants mentioned that there are no regulations which allow them to take strict measures on defaulters, action taken by local authorities against defaulters has met a response from the Minister of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development who has previously ordered local authorities to stop auctioning properties of residents who default payment of rates and taxes, Maponga (2012). This has resulted in local authorities preparing strategic plans only to follow a directive

and not to realise the essence of the directive. Zimbabwean local authorities are creatures of statute this means that they have no choice but to comply with legislation. The legislations that guide the operations of local authorities restrict them in implementing their strategic plans. Section 46 of the Rural District Councils' Act Chapter 29:13 indicates that full council meets once in three months, however, a considerable amount of work accumulates after committees have made recommendations and it is stored until the full council convenes, this then reveals that decision making in council is left to the officials of council. The Rural District Councils' Act Chapter 29:13 provides for the approval of the budget by the Minister. This is a measure to ensure that local authorities do not overcharge but it has some negative effects on council strategic plans. The Minister takes time to approve the budgets though the strategic plans are formulated on time. The Minister determines the tariffs and he can instruct local authorities not to raise tariffs though the prices of the inputs needed to implement activities maybe increasing. At the same time the strategic plans are expected to be implemented. Lack of financial resources leaves the local authorities with no option but to store the document awaiting its period to elapse. This was indicated by Chakaipa (2010) who said that local authorities produce elaborate plans only to have them unimplemented because of a plethora of challenges that hinder the implementation process. Inclusion of the local authorities in the new constitution would afford them some reasonable levels of autonomy and enable them to implement without interference of the central government.

Lack of stakeholder participation in the strategic planning process has led to stakeholders and ratepayers lacking interest in the implementation of the plans. Ratepayers are not aware of the strategic plan and there is no buy in on its implementation. It is clear that residents feel neglected or rather side-lined by Council on the strategic planning and implementation process. Community Based Planning (CBP) is not being practised. Community Based Planning is the participatory process whereby local knowledge is packaged into an action plan. Rather than waiting for government to develop plans for the community, communities lead the initiative by prioritizing development interventions and coming up with a comprehensive development plan. The use of CBP would ensure that plans that are produced can be designed, implemented and maintained by the local community that initiated them; this ensures acceptance and minimal resistance, thereby enabling successful implementation of plans

Since 1997, Zimbabwean local authorities have been formulating strategic plans in order to strategise on better modes of service delivery. However, implementation of strategic plans is not being fully

implemented as evidenced by the poor service delivery. NRDC does not have a success story about strategic planning. The plans are prepared and then stored without execution of what was documented in the plan. This explicitly indicates that the translation of the documented plan into actions to produce visible results is lagging. Major findings from discussions and interviews from key informants established mixed feelings in the manner in which implementation is taking place, its effectiveness and efficiency. There is a general feeling of disappointment with the manner in which implementation is taking place because stakeholders, particularly the residents feel that they are getting a raw deal from the service provider.

Despite the statutory requirements to have strategic plans implemented, this will not be an easy task for local authorities, particularly because of the dynamic environment consisting of the various challenges that beset them. These challenges exhibit requirement for a paradigm shift on the part of local authorities to ensure successful implementation of strategies. Research reveals that the whole process is being done in a 'top down' manner. This is in contradiction to the tenets of a 'bottom up' approach as implied by the Prime Minister's Directive (1984 & 1985) which calls for a participatory approach.

CONCLUSION

One can conclude that though this local authority has a strategic plan in place, there are a number of impediments to implementation. There is lack of stakeholder participation in the strategic planning process which has led to stakeholders and ratepayers lacking interest in the implementation of the plans. It is clear that residents feel neglected or rather sidelined by Council on the strategic planning and implementation process. The various legislations that guide the operations of local authorities restrict them to show up their full potential in implementing their strategic plans. Political polarisation at NRDC hinders implementation of strategies as council boardrooms have been turned into battlefields due to political differences. Lack of financial resources is another challenge that has threatened the successful implementation of strategic plans by NRDC. NRDC is cash strapped and revenue inflows are inadequate, inadequate funding from the government coupled with late approval of borrowing powers hampers implementation efforts. The local authority has failed to keep abreast with the rapidly changing technological environment as a result it is incapacitated technologically. It is imperative that the local authority addresses the situation so as to improve service delivery.

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