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Youth in Urban Governance: Rationalities, Encounters and Interaction in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The article critiques the role and position of the youth in urban governance in post-2000 Zimbabwe. Using cases from two urban centres, the analysis maps the contribution of young people to local governance and evaluates the impact of specific forms of governance on young people. The article observes that young people regard governance as a transient phenomenon, a site suitable for opportunistic forays. Their involvement in governance is short term and driven by strategic rationality. Consequently, young people assume different and sometimes contradictory roles. Young people in this context are manifestly averse to developing long-term alliances within their own ranks and with other social agents.

Keywords: local governance; urban youth; youth agency; Zimbabwean crisis

Introduction

Globally, when urban youth hit the headlines, it mostly has to do with some forms of antisocial behaviour. This behaviour is attributed partly to the nature of urban areas which, as urban social geographers insist, provide fertile breeding ground for malfeasance.¹ Additionally, in developing countries, urban youth are portrayed as victims of a multiplicity of ills plaguing cities. Echoing this thinking, Lipsitz grimly proclaims, "For many youths around the world ... the hour is midnight."² In this 'midnight hour', victims easily become villains when

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they turn to vices such as hustling and drug abuse. Almost habitually, diagnoses and depictions of 'youth problems' take 'urban crises' as a point of departure.

Accordingly, African cities are viewed as "cities in crisis",³ perpetually haunted by chronic social, economic, political and environmental problems. Although young people are not unaffected by these maladies, in the rush to diagnose problems and prescribe remedies, policy-makers, activists and academics analyse the crises as if they were beyond the scope and comprehension of the youth.⁴ In this respect, governments, civil society and 'communities' are the focus of attention, with adults invariably monopolising attention.

Urban Zimbabwe is no different. Zimbabwe's composite crisis has raised questions on two intertwined issues, namely, governance and livelihood. Some argue that the multifarious socio-political and economic tribulations that have bedevilled the country since 2000 are a result of a "crisis of governance".⁵ Always cited or alluded to in the list of causative misdeeds is economic mismanagement, characterised by endemic corruption and suicidal economic policies, chief among them being the legendary destruction of commercial agriculture in the wake of the controversial land reform programme. Invariably raised in the endless diagnoses is also a perceived relentless assault on democracy by political repression, disregard for the rule of law, violation of human rights and a fundamentally flawed electoral framework.⁶ These faults are blamed for creating a hostile environment where livelihoods have been severely impaired, with treble-digit inflation and a soaring cost of living; all this in the midst of burgeoning poverty, spiralling unemployment, crippling shortages and an enduring black market.

It is easy to view the 'Zimbabwean crisis' and the ensuing contestations as essentially 'adult' affairs. The thinking is reflected in the words of one young person in the small town of Banket who quipped, "It is them [adults] who created the mess, and ... who make it worse. We, we have to live in this s***. What can we do?"⁷ Be that as it may, youth agency in crisis-ridden Zimbabwe bespeaks a demographic and social category that is as affected and involved as any. This is particularly true of urban governance and livelihoods. Here, one finds youth deep in the thick of things, as foot soldiers and pawns, autonomous agents and transitory allies, victims and villains, the excluded and excluders.

In simultaneous crises that have touched everyone, youth find themselves struggling – like everyone else – on a daily basis to live another day. This is by far the strongest motivation in their activities and how they relate and respond to the multiple crises. It is in a bid to live another day that the youth struggle to conquer and occupy niches, to defend and expand those niches. It is in a bid for self-preservation that they find themselves involved in the seemingly 'adult' world of local and national governance, where they interact with others in fascinating games and intrigues – always tainted with selfish intentions – where pretence, multiple identities, grandstanding, fleeting alliances, dishonesty and disruptive behaviour are essential

qualities to be heard, to get results, to belong, and to be party to some compromise where some material or symbolic gain, however minute, is guaranteed:

That is not to say that Zimbabwe's youth are unique among African youth. They are certainly not the only ones hit by crises, who have to operate in a hostile environment. Unlike their counterparts in the West who "are more likely than their elders to be involved in organizations devoted to particular issues" and influence specific political agendas,⁸ African youth rarely influence political agendas; they remain largely marginalised and excluded from mainstream political and social processes.⁹ Thus, not only do African youth have to grapple with "tremendous odds", thanks in part to "malfunctioning and failing states", but they are also kept at the periphery in state policies and legislation.¹⁰ However, as advised by Abbink and van Kessel, "it would be a mistake to deny African youth intentionality of action and agency."¹¹ So it is that the African youth, as shown in many studies, "often manage to author identities and make themselves heard in localised ... niches".¹² This is evidenced in the part played by young men and women in the politics of authoritarian states, the armed conflicts of West Africa, as well as the urban cultural and entertainment scenes of southern and East Africa.¹³

This article, based on research in two urban centres in Zimbabwe, takes a closer look at the role and position of youth in urban governance in twenty-first-century Zimbabwe. The purpose is not only to map the much-neglected contribution of the youth to (democratic?) local governance, but also to evaluate the impact of specific forms and processes of governance on the everyday life of young people. The first part looks at the terms of the debate by briefly discussing rationality. This is followed by an overview of the research. Thereafter, the research findings are analysed and discussed. The concluding section revisits the emerging issues.

Analytical Framework

One way to understand the interaction of youth with systems of local governance is by unravelling the form of rationality at work. Three forms of rationality were of interest in this study. These are: (1) instrumental rationality, which borrows from systems and decision theories;¹⁵ (2) communicative rationality, developed by Jürgen Habermas;¹⁶ and (3) strategic rationality, largely informed by the work of Michel Foucault.¹⁶

Instrumental rationality is the basis of the rational comprehensive model of decision making¹⁷ which, in most public administration, follows the 'planning cycle'.¹⁸ In the cycle, qualified techno-bureaucrats identify and define problems, set goals and formulate objectives, consider and assess all possible alternatives, and choose the best alternative. Implementation, monitoring and the feedback of outcomes follow thereafter.¹⁹ The authoritative person in the process is the technocrat, whose only interaction with the 'laypeople' being planned for is when they provide information in the data-gathering phase. In democracies, stakeholders may file objections to the

final 'scientific' decision. However, it is the techno-bureaucrat who plays a central role in instrumental rationality. Showing how this 'hegemony' is masked by scientism, Alexander notes that the rational decision-maker "blends scientific analysis and competent professional judgement with the persuasion of technical expertise".²⁰

In this mode of decision making, the urban youth are necessarily excluded from the process, not least because they are not recognised as valid 'stakeholders' in terms of property ownership or the payment of taxes. They are nothing more than 'decision objects', whose role is to abide by provisions of official edicts. This is the dominant method of decision making in virtually all public sector bureaucracies in anglophone southern Africa.

In contrast to the undemocratic practices based on instrumental rationality, the highly normative communicative rationality assumes an all-inclusive "ideal speech situation" in which all affected parties – not merely officially recognised stakeholders – freely engage to arrive at joint decisions through mutual consensus.²¹ Asymmetries of power or other advantages should not distort the process of unforced consensus. Communicative rationality facilitates communicative action, which is "oriented toward intersubjective understanding, the coordination of actions through discussion and the socialisation of members of the community".²² Unlike instrumental rationality, which is dominated by the techno-bureaucrat, communicative rationality demands a situation that is "free from deception ... and domination through the exercise of power".²³

Freedom from domination and communicative competence – the capability to make and question arguments fully – characterises communicative rationality. Consequently, "the only remaining authority is that of a good argument",²⁴ what Habermas describes as the "force of the better argument".²⁵ Thus, rather than dominating the proceedings, a good bureaucrat will seek consensus emanating from a process that entails genuine collaboration by all affected parties. Because of this "impractical idealisation",²⁶ communicative rationality has been criticized for ignoring the role of power in societal interaction.²⁷

Being the process of problem solving and conflict resolution through open discussion, communicative rationality appears to favour the inclusion of the youth who are excluded and marginalised by instrumental rationality. Its inclusiveness and demand for a level playing field makes communicative action more youth-friendly than instrumental rationality, until one talks about the real world and 'communicative competence'. As this article shows, youth are seldom equally capable of making and questioning arguments in the manner demanded by communicative rationality. Like elsewhere in the world, power and resource asymmetries still haunt the relationship between the youth and other citizens in various national and local institutions of governance in all of Africa.

In the real world, distorted as it is by power and resource asymmetries, and driven by selfishness and short-term goals, strategic rationality is rampant. This form of rationality aptly applies to the social world because interaction includes intentions, strategies and decisions of other individuals.²⁸ Advocates of strategic rationality

borrow heavily from Foucault's power analytics.²⁹ Here, power is unavoidable because it pervades every relationship; however, power inevitably coexists with resistance.³⁰ Vividly describing the rational strategist at work, Alexander states that the effective bureaucrat, in this case the planner, "achieves results by recognising power and applying strategic rationality ... in playing Machiavellian realpolitik ('realistic politics')"³¹ based on practical concerns rather than idealisations. For this reason, strategic rationality is guided by political expediency. Societal interaction is motivated by practical rather than theoretical, moral or ideological considerations. Hence strategic rationality is orientated towards the realisation of specific short-term private objectives. Thus, "instrumental alliances with some powerful interests and selective confrontation with others..."³² are the hallmark of strategic rationality.

This type of rationality bears some resemblance to "'realist' assumptions that politics has to do with conflicts among self-interested political actors".³³ Using this framework, it can be posited that, being political actors, urban youth are also driven by self-interest. Like everybody else, the urban youth in Zimbabwe operate in an environment riven by conflict among people whose pursuits in societal interaction are by no means entirely altruistic.

Methodology

This article is based on research conducted in two urban areas, the capital city Harare and a small agricultural town, Banket. The aim of the study was to map the role of youth in local governance in an urban context. The two areas were deliberately chosen because of their contrasting characteristics, in terms of size, political representation, and 'distance' (social and spatial) from institutions of governance, namely, local and central government. Harare is an opposition stronghold, while Banket lies in an area that has consistently returned ruling party political representatives in parliamentary and local elections.³⁴ Table 1 summarises the composition of the sample. In total, 94 young people aged between 14 and 25 years were selected for the discussions. The youth were recruited from their known 'business' locations (informal sector trading sites) in the low-income areas of Warren Park One (Harare) and Kuwadzana Township (Banket). An earlier pilot study had shown that these were the only youth who effectively engaged institutions of local governance. Other young people – those still attending school and those who were 'gainfully employed' – did not show an interest in directly engaging institutions of governance. For them, this was adult territory. Apart from the sick and disabled, there were virtually no young people in this age group who were just 'sitting at home' on a long-term basis.

To ensure that the youth selected had 'a story to tell', only those who had been operating for at least two years were selected. This decision was based on the results of a pilot survey. The research focused on youth in contested urban spaces, namely spaces where they did not have legal entitlement to occupy and use urban land.

Table 1: Demographic composition of young people who participated in the study

Centre	Male			Female			Total	
	N	% Total	% Group	N	%	% Group	N	%
Harare	28	29.8	58.3	26	27.7	56.5	54	57.4
Banket	20	21.3	41.7	20	21.3	43.5	40	42.6
TOTAL (N = 94)	48	51.1	100.0	46	48.9	100.0	94	100.0

Source: Own research, 2004–2005

With the help of three graduate students, I carried out focus group discussions in the two centres. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to initiate discussion and develop probing questions to the issues raised. The focus groups consisted of seven to ten young people. The topics of discussion revolved around the interaction of youth with institutions of local governance, among them the urban planning system, which, to a large extent, controls access to the youth's 'business premises'. Particularly sought in the discussion was young people's interpretation of key encounters. The purpose was to discern which 'rationality' was at work in these societal interactions. In addition to the focus group discussions, I also undertook non-participant observation, as well as interviews with some professionals.

Results

This section analyses those aspects of the focus group discussions that dwelt on institutions of governance, with particular reference to their encounters and interaction with youth. The discussions focused on the workings of the technical-professional side, represented by urban managers (professionals), and the political side, represented by councillors and Members of Parliament (MPs).

The Youth in National Policy

Zimbabwe's National Youth Policy (NYP) stresses "youth participation in development" as one of its key objectives. This is designed to redress the problem of "inadequate youth participation".³⁵ In this regard, one of the "key strategic areas" of the NYP is "youth empowerment and participation". Zimbabwe's youth have a Ministry, the Ministry of Youth Development and Employment (MYDEC), dedicated to their wellbeing. MYDEC's mission statement is "to transform and empower youth for nation building". This is designed to arrive at the MYDEC's final goal, namely, "to develop wholesome future leaders". In the single instance that governance is mentioned in the document, the policy boldly declares that it will use the National Youth Service (NYS)

to “facilitate direct participation and involvement of youth in national issues at all levels of governance”. Specifying its “priority target groups”, the NYP focuses on youth who “are in a more disadvantaged position ...” Among these are unemployed youth, adolescent girls and street children. The following section sheds some light on the situation on the ground and how well it aligns with the ideals on paper.

Encounter

Young people do not have structured or defined access to local or central government. Asked how they gained access to the local authority, the youth in Harare and Banket stated that they did so through politicians and other “big people”. There was awareness, particularly in Harare, that the councillor was their gateway to council, while the MP was the link to national governance. Further probing revealed this was mainly an expectation rather than the practice. Being so distant from their MP, Banket youth, both male and female, seemed to believe that the local councillor was their sole representative. Asked about the local MP who is also the Local Government, Public Works and Urban Development Minister and a senior member of ZANU-PF (the ruling political party), the youth said he was “always unavailable” and inaccessible because he was “too important”.

Regarding actual encounters, it emerged that both local authorities “came” to the youth usually when “things were wrong” and the “youth were to blame”. Particularly in Harare, it was repeatedly pointed out that the local authority dispatched planners and the municipal police either to threaten or evict the youth for violating planning, property, environmental, public health or building regulations. The discussions revealed very few occasions when council-initiated encounters were for purposes other than policing, punishment, and the enforcement of local statutes and regulations. The outstanding exception were social workers in Harare City Council’s Department of Housing and Community Services who visited young people for “reconnaissance”, “surveys”, and “community outreach”. Sometimes they apparently just came to while away the hours.

Banket did not have many formal council-initiated encounters. Officers – who turned out to be from the project planning unit in Zvimba Rural District Council (ZRDC) under whose jurisdiction Banket falls – paid sporadic visits for planning “for projects that never come”. Notably, some local authority employees were known for “visiting” the youth to collect “rentals” or bribes.

Harare youth were clearer on who it was they encountered in the local authority. They were more aware of the departmental affiliation of the people they dealt with. Among council’s operational units, four (City Health, Planning (Development Control), Building Inspectorate, and the Municipal Police) featured prominently. Banket youth were not so clear. The organisational identity of the project planners was determined only because one of their visits coincided with the research. This could be because

of the spatial distance to the head office of ZRDC, which is about 100 km away at Murombedzi Growth Point.

Interaction

This section looks at approaches, strategies and rationales of politicians and professionals. In most cases, interaction is issue-dependent. People from institutions of local governance characteristically act in ways that bespeak the authority of their offices and the perception of their jobs.

Professionals

The discussions left one in no doubt that instrumental rationality dominated the strategies and approaches of professionals in local government. In Harare, planners adhered closely to the rational comprehensive approach to planning and decision making. The professionals interviewed constantly invoked scientific decision making as the distinguishing feature between them and laypeople including, and particularly, the youth. The professionals view themselves as means–ends technicians, “policy executors”, whose brief is to devise the best way to implement policy.

One planner echoed the opinions of his colleagues when he quipped rather dismissively, “Our job is to get things done ... rationally, professionally and scientifically.” Because of this claim to science, professionals found it “untenable to work with the youth”. “What do they know? ... What can they tell me? What can they contribute? ... What value can they add?” a senior planner rapidly fired when asked if it was advisable to deliberately exclude those affected by the issues with which the local authority would be dealing.

This scientism inevitably marginalises the youth to the ranks of “those planned for”. In both Harare and Banket, the young people’s contribution to official planning and decision-making processes was limited to providing needed information in official surveys and abiding by the final decision arrived at “professionally and scientifically”. There was no single reported instance when the youth were involved in discussions or negotiations with the decision-making machinery. One quiet Banket youth complained,

They come bearing their clipboards ... count us ... question us, and jot something down. That is all.

Graphically depicting the official approaches, the youth in Banket joked that to council officials, they were just numbers. In a revealing statement, one male noted that the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), the official state police, knew and understood the youth better than the “conceited and selfish” council officials. These young people literally praised the ZRP for investing their time in talking to, questioning, and observing them. Tellingly, according to the youth, the Police Community Liaison

Department, and the Criminal Investigations Department (CID), generally feared and loathed by the youth, “handled” them much better than the local authority.

Politicians

The politicians who featured in the discussion were local councillors, MPs and the political party leadership in the area. In Harare, there was regular interaction between political representatives and the youth. Warren Park One, like the rest of the city, is an opposition stronghold. As expected, the MP and councillor³⁶⁷ frequently met with the youth, who, by their own admission, leaned towards the opposition (but, see discussion below). The two politicians’ approach was decidedly populist. They mingled with the youth, listened to them, and discussed their problems, complaints and petitions. The politicians were described as accessible and approachable. The youth, both male and female, agreed that they felt at ease around the politicians. They affectionately referred to them as “our true leaders”.

An interesting pattern was detected during the Harare discussions. Both the MP and the councillor, being opposition politicians, would devote a large part of the interaction with youth blaming government and mourning their professed helplessness, as they were not “the government of the day”. The young people largely agreed with them. They sympathised with the representatives’ unenviable task of dealing with a government that was controlled by a party other than “our own party”. Thus, while substantive issues did feature in the interaction, the politicians also habitually took time to cast aspersions on central government, especially the controversial local government minister.

In Banket, the long-serving councillor, a local ruling party leader, and the MP’s ‘sidekick’, is easily accessible. At the time of the study he owned a house in the low-income part of the town and was employed by a parastatal. Young people agreed that they could easily talk to him if they took the initiative. But he was blamed for being bossy, uneducated, as well as “lacking understanding” and empathy. However, there was unanimity that he was by far easier to “do business with” than council officials. He did have his moments though, mostly around election time, when he would be all charm, mingling with the youth, taking note of their problems and making promises. Being the most powerful local politician in a small town where political clout counts, the councillor could easily deliver if he so wished. To curry favour with the youth, he could burst into council offices and get things done – a feat he had performed on several crucial occasions.

The local MP, a senior ruling party member, did not have much time for youth. The discussions noted no direct interaction with them, even during election time – those rare moments when he spared some time for the people of Banket. It was agreed among the youth, that the MP whom they tellingly preferred to call “minister”, was “expensive”, hence his “scarcity”. He normally dealt with them through the councillor, his appointed intermediary, whom the youth sometimes derogatively referred to as “the

amplifier" or "the filter". It seems the 'minister' saw no reason to insinuate himself into the lives of the youth. This explains why the minister, notorious for influence peddling at the national level, is virtually absent in local politics.

Youth in Action

This section analyses young people in detail. It examines how they access the system of governance and interact with some components of that system. It also takes a closer look at young people, how they organise and how others perceive them.

Encounter

The discussions revealed that complaints and petitions motivated most of the encounters initiated by the youth in Harare and Banket. One young person from Harare accurately summed it up when she stated that they 'went' to council mainly to vent their spleen or to plead. The other encounters mentioned were regular and impersonal when young people visited the bureaucracy to apply for, or renew, licences and to pay the attendant licence fees. Complaint-related encounters were characterised by noisy group marches to council premises. These protests, described as "rowdy, unreasonable and hysterical" by a Harare bureaucrat, were always in response to council threats, or intentions and actions that were perceived not to be in the interest of the youth. Most such marches occurred in Harare, with Banket having recorded only two in the previous four years.

Notably, in both urban centres the protests were spur-of-the-moment, not having been preceded by prior notice either in the form of an appointment with council officials, or notification of the police as required by law.³⁷ The youth would merely walk into council premises or pour onto the streets. Sometimes, especially in Harare, young people did invite the MP or councillor to come and deliberate with them. Needless to say, walking into a council office without an appointment did not work out very well, especially if it was an individual visit for purposes other than 'normal' business. Groups did sometimes get an audience if they managed to attract enough attention, were a big enough nuisance and the police were not too keen to disperse them, mainly because of some "external pressure", a term that is used to refer to senior ruling party politicians.

Interaction

Young people in both locations intimated that they "played games" to get "something" from their dealings with institutions of local governance. There was an explicit acknowledgement that when all was well there would be no need to interact with systems of local governance. As an outspoken Harare youth summed it up,

They do their job ... we live our lives.

The fact that all interactions were undertaken when things were not right perhaps explains the strategies adopted when dealing with the system.

In many of the interactions, young people adopted a confrontational approach. Young people from Harare mentioned increases in licence fees, harassment, unpopular planning decisions, evictions and threats of evictions as issues that had led to them mobilising and demonstrating against the local authority or its employees.³⁸ The marches and demonstrations were sometimes not limited to the youth, but would be part of larger 'community protests' by informal sector operators. It was noted – and observed – that youth are the most visible and vocal group in these protests. Most of the marches were largely spontaneous, with no conscious pre-planned mobilisation. In contrast to complaints, petitions were more thoughtful and considered. Typically, a petition would be preceded by an on-site meeting or, rarely, a series of meetings after which a delegation would be hastily assembled to present the petition to the local authority.

It was not uncommon, particularly in Banket, for individuals or a group of individuals to take a petition to council and present it as a group petition. Some young people were known to accost council officials with specific personal complaints or petitions. In some cases, some of the youth would take their own cases to council. This occurred in Banket where some females were accused of and admitted to "going solo" to spare themselves from harassment or eviction, or to "buy favours" in terms of getting access to larger or more strategically located "premises".

In encounters initiated by the youth, the interactions were usually driven by single-item agendas. They were also extremely short term. Of the ten most recent interactions in Harare, eight concerned single and immediate issues. Among them were fee increases, relocations, expansion, toilets and harassment. The longest term of these was when the youth demanded the resignation of an officer notorious for harassing them. In Banket, there had never been a long-term perspective or more than one item on the agenda. The issues almost mirrored those of Harare, with the exception, as noted above, that the Banket youth also explicitly asked for favours as individuals.

At those rare times when audience was granted, usually after a much-publicised demonstration, the 'meetings' – if they can be described as such – were typically disorderly. Usually, the youth would get into the 'meeting' with written demands. Their perception of a meeting was the presentation of the demand, laced with threats, shouting or weeping – a 'trick' that the females boasted of using regularly, sometimes at the bidding of their male colleagues. One frustrated Harare planner complained,

You cannot reason with these kids. They have one-track minds ... Would you describe as negotiation [sic] when someone whimpers, threatens you and refuses to listen ... or cannot comprehend your explanations?³⁹

One interesting issue that cropped up in both locations was that of alliances. The youth knew that some issues could not be resolved without external assistance. They needed a voice or 'some muscle'. This perhaps explains the prevalence of 'clientelism' in both

Harare and Banket. The availability of opportunists vying for publicity, resources,⁴⁰ or political office made the young people's work easier. To this end, youth from Harare actually had a register of whom to approach for specific issues. The discussion captured a diverse list of local politicians, religious leaders, media personalities, civil society organisations and activists who could be of assistance to the youth in their dealings with the local authority. Among these were influential people who did business with youth, either as suppliers or customers. Banket youth did not have such a diverse list. Their list was almost exclusively made up of politicians and activists, top of the list being the local councillor and his rivals.

On the issue of interests, it emerged that the youth had only one interest – enhancing and preserving their way of life. They were not interested in broader issues relating to local politics and decision making, even if these could have a bearing on their pursuits. This is in stark contrast to some groups (such as religious, woman's or environmental groups) who had longer-term perspectives and strategies, and were prepared to invest time and effort in trying to change political and decision-making structures. Significantly, youth readily admitted that they could become whatever was needed to protect their interests. Little wonder that they entered into alliances that were notoriously short term and issue-driven. To this end, the youth assumed different identities depending on the issue and the perceived ally in the numerous patron–client relationships identified during the discussions. They used, among other things, church membership, political party affiliation, gender, family situation and socio-economic status as temporary raw materials for the construction of transient identities. This enabled them not only to come under the protection of some patron, but also conveniently to couple with the other 'governed' in similar situations. Once the mission was accomplished, they would decouple, only to construct new issue-dependent identities when the need arose. At the time of the study, the run-up to parliamentary elections, youth were political party members, and some switched allegiances between the two major political parties as the need arose.

That is not to say that they always acted in unison. Partly as a result of the multiplicity of possible identities, youth in both locations were not a cohesive body. They did not constitute a coherent community, with a common purpose and strategy at any one time. Raptures, splits and divergences were reported and observed. The divisions were invariably issue-specific. There were different groupings at different times and for different issues, based on attributes such as gender, political affiliation, age and household situation. For example, girls were blamed for breaking ranks to solicit favours; they were also targets for intervention by women's organisations. The under-18s, both male and female, were beneficiaries of interventions by at least two children's rights organisations. Some young people, claiming to be AIDS orphans, used their plight to extract concessions or as a trump card in confrontations with authorities. The politically polarised situation in Harare played itself out among the youth, who were sometimes divided along political lines depending on individual calculations. In Banket, 15 per cent of the youth had even attended and graduated

from the controversial National Youth Service (NYS), which would have made them out and out ZANU-PF supporters.⁴¹ Others were known campaign agents of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

What came out clearly from the discussions was that these assumed identities and intra-youth divisions were based on individual calculations, and were by no means permanent. Even after investing much in specific identities, some youths were known to shed them “just like that” (interview). For example, two of the young people who had been trained under the NYS, and were presumably ZANU-PF adherents, turned out to be card-carrying members of the MDC and openly campaigned for the MDC candidate in the parliamentary elections. Particularly in Harare, these self-interested transient identities translated into short-lived multiple groupings and fluid alliances within the youth.

It also emerged from the study that youth, though excluded from mainstream social and political processes, were themselves not open to outsiders. Theirs is a closed world, where outsiders are allowed only at the fringes, preferably by invitation, and only temporarily at that. Political parties and civil society groups had attempted on numerous occasions to penetrate the youth world with little long-term success. One visibly frustrated youth worker put it metaphorically,

It's not like they let you in when you want to get in. When you knock at the door, they do not invite you in. If they answer at all ... and they think you are not empty-handed ... they may come out and deal with you at the door ... When they are finished, they go back in and shut the door behind them.

Clearly, the youth are “excluding the excluders”.⁴²

Conclusion: Emerging Issues

What emerged from the study were the contrasting rationalities at work in local governance. The preceding analysis reveals divergences in rationalities between youth and politicians, on the one hand, and technocrats on the other. Whereas professionals are adherents of instrumental rationality with its scientism and relegation of irrational issues to the periphery, the youth and politicians showed all the trademarks of strategic rationality. Both were openly self-interested and calculating, and were bent on getting whatever they could from the interactive space. The youth and politicians are willing to use each other – and allow themselves to be used by the other party – as long as there is something in it for them. Thus, politicians unhesitatingly prevail upon technocrats to grant concessions to youth, while the youth readily act as megaphones and foot soldiers for politicians, knowing full well that “harvest time” will come, when they will reap the fruits of their efforts.

Not surprisingly, in the interactive space in urban governance in Zimbabwe, one finds no evidence – and indeed no room – for “deliberative democracy”⁴³ with its insistence on communicative rationality and mutual consensus. Asymmetric power

relations, skewed resource endowment, as well as mistrust, self-interested intentions and lack of empathy, distort the field to such an extent that it would be unwise to expect anything beyond the instrumental and strategic rationality currently deployed. Consequently, there is virtually no space for negotiation, and no room for partnership. The professional–layperson and patron–client relationships find excellent breeding ground in the pervasive professional disdain for, and the political manipulation of, youth. This is an environment suitable only for currying favours and influence peddling.

Obliviously, the interactive space is tainted with bad faith. Professionals do not take young people seriously, choosing to look at them as temporary nuisances and things to be planned for. To the technocrats, young people are nothing more than ‘incomplete adults’; they have not graduated to the level at which they can be taken seriously, so their opinions do not count for much. Not interested in political capital – and therefore unlikely to require the services of youth – planners and their professional counterparts would rather pay attention to ratepayers and politicians, real constituencies who can make a change in the situation.

On their part, young people loathe and distrust technocrats, hence their theatrics and brinkmanship when it comes to making demands. Faced with an issue, youth would rather spend money and time hunting for politicians and activists than visit a council office and talk to some professional who, unless pushed into it, would not grant them an audience anyway. Better results can be obtained by enlisting the services of intermediaries, mostly politicians and, in some cases, civil society. All too often, these ‘saviours’ are themselves self-interested strategic rationalists who despise and mistreat the fickle youth, but find it necessary to work with them for their own ends.

This explains the transient and issue-dependent nature of youth’s societal interaction in urban governance. Young people approach politicians only when they (youth) need something from them. The flirtations tend to last as long as the issue, with the tacit understanding that the assisted party will reciprocate at some point in the future. “No thorny issue, no interaction” – this is the unwritten rule. Unless there is some burning issue, youth “stay away” from local governance. This is buttressed by the notoriously short-term perspective of the interacting parties. Technocrats need their decisions, politicians seek political capital, and the youth want to fend off threats or overcome some setback. This situation does not make for long-term partnerships and allegiances, nor does it demand long-term commitments.

Perhaps what the young people need is active citizenship. But the environment is far from conducive. Youth lack the respect that can enable them to be taken on board and be bona fide partners in development and social change. In technical and professional calculations, youth are not people who can be negotiated with, or whose voice is needed in any consensus-building exercise. They can be short-term nuisances, foot soldiers and pawns, victims and villains, but certainly not partners.

Maybe the youth want it that way. Perhaps it is too difficult to elevate them to the level of partners who can be negotiated with, who can be involved in decision making, and whose input can be incorporated in development and social change. Two points noted above make this a credible statement. First, youth are fragmented; most of them have no fixed identities or allegiances. If they are to be taken on board, one has to ask the question: taken on board as what? Being 'youth' is seemingly the only thing they have in common, which is fairly stable. But it is a tag they rarely use and for which the study found no collective appeal. Second, the young people tend to exclude others from their world. They do not let outsiders in even if it is to their benefit to do so. This is not an organised response, or strategy. It is not even an unwritten law with rewards and sanctions attached to it; rather, it appears to be an internalised 'instinctive' reaction born out of mistrust.

Embracing Zimbabwe's urban youth as stakeholders requires not only a change in the system of governance, but also changes within youth themselves. The instrumental rationality that the professionals cherish is not conducive to establishing strong working partnerships and discussing issues of common concern beyond the realms of technocracy. It leaves decision making in the cryptic methodologies of a few. However, at the same time, the youth's self-interest-driven strategic rationality, with its attendant emphasis on immediate benefits and short-term vision, as well as the manifest absence of long-term commitments, is not conducive to meaningful interaction and workable partnerships. The same applies to persistent fragmentation, precipitous identities, and exclusionary predispositions.

Technocrats treat youth as "subjects, clients and consumers"⁴⁴ with no voice in broader issues of local governance. Even politicians, who sometimes 'work with' the youth, are far from recognising them as "citizens of equal social worth and decision-making capacity."⁴⁵ The situation is not made any better by the youth who view themselves as subjects rather than citizens.⁴⁶ Thus, in the final analysis, it could be argued that the non-involvement of youth in local governance is a result not only of exclusion, but also of them standing aloof.

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- 34 Incidentally, the Minister of Local Government, Public Works and Urban Development, famous for his bruising battles with the opposition-controlled Harare City Council, is the Member of Parliament (MP) for the constituency (Zvimba North) that includes Banket.
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- 38 Some of these were purely based on rumours or speculations about council decisions or intentions. One such protest was sparked by rumours that council intended to move informal sector 'business premises' to the back of a shopping centre to make way for a large supermarket. It later emerged from the planners that this was merely gossip.
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- 40 This was particularly true of 8 non-governmental organisations identified.
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