



Rural local authorities and disaster resilience in Zimbabwe

S. Bernard Manyena

*Disaster and Development Centre, Northumbria University,
Newcastle upon Tyne, UK*

Abstract

Purpose – Building disaster-resilient communities is one of the strategies of reducing the impact of disasters in marginalised communities. In Zimbabwe, the role of Rural District Councils (RDCs) as facilitating agencies in the realisation of this agenda cannot be overemphasised. However, at present, RDCs are unlikely to be effective towards the realisation of the disaster risk reduction agenda because, in effect, this means finding ways of tackling well known development problems for which there are no easy or obvious solutions. Using case study material from Binga RDC in the Zambezi Valley, Zimbabwe, this paper seeks to argue that building institutional capacity for RDCs is fundamental if the disaster resilience agenda has to be realised.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on the author's experiences in Binga District in Zimbabwe to show how disaster resilience is linked with capacity building, decentralisation and internal organisational structures of RDCs.

Findings – RDCs are facing a number of challenges, which include inadequate financial and human resources; unstable political system; problems related to decentralisation and the nature and role of RDCs in Zimbabwe. Capacity building, full decentralisation package and internal organisational structure of rural local authorities are some of the central fundamentals for building disaster-resilient communities

Practical implications – With capacity building being at the centre of the building community resilience, coordination by donors as well as government agencies is fundamental. The circumstances under which RDCs are operating in Zimbabwe, highlights the implicit demand for the government to further consider fiscal and administrative aspects of the decentralisation. Proffering a devolved structure-participation outcome scenario leaves RDCs in a miserable fiscal and administrative position to tackle issues related to long-term disaster risk reduction and sustainable development.

Originality/value – The paper introduces the concept of disaster resilience focusing on Rural Local Authorities. It illuminates the complexities surrounding the delivery of the resilience agenda and how governments, local government authorities, donor community and civil society are implicated.

Keywords Disasters, Communities, Development, Zimbabwe

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

The past decade has experienced an unprecedented increase in natural and human-induced disasters with the biggest rise being in countries with a low human development index (World Disaster Report, 2004). The debate over the efficacy of the efforts introduced during the United Nations Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990-2000), has “ushered” in the disaster resilience agenda which has emerged as one of the key strategies towards the achievement of disaster reduction goals as contained in the 2005 “Hyogo Declaration”. Community based disaster management (CBDM) is one of the frameworks for implementing the disaster resilience strategy.

CBDM calls for people at the local level to take charge of their disaster risk reduction agenda. It is, therefore, logical to see local authorities as vehicles through



which the disaster risk agenda could be championed as they are rooted in the local communities where disasters happen. In the Zimbabwean context, Rural District Councils (RDCs) are “decentralised” government units expected to deliver the disaster risk reduction goals in the rural areas of Zimbabwe. However, in a close analysis of RDCs in their development work, a litany of challenges tends to emerge: inadequate financial and human resources; unstable political system; problems related to decentralisation and the nature and role of RDCs in Zimbabwe.

This paper uses the case study material from Binga District in the Zambezi Valley, northwestern part of Zimbabwe to examine the challenges for RDCs to deliver the disaster risk reduction agenda. The capacity of a local authority to develop disaster resilience depends to a large extent on its general capacity to plan and manage development activities. This is particularly true in a district like Binga, where drought triggered disasters have become a chronic problem; in this situation, most aspects of development affect disaster resilience, directly or indirectly. It would be somewhat less true, but not irrelevant, if the disasters were occasional and unpredictable such as earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanoes. This paper will therefore largely dwell on the general development management challenges for Binga RDC as an agency of building disaster resilient communities.

Binga has been chosen for two major reasons. First and foremost Binga District, home of the Tonga ethnic group, presents an interesting but challenging development scenario. In Binga District about 85-90 per cent of the population is trapped in absolute poverty that requires permanent welfare in the form of food assistance every year (SCF-UK, 2003). The low socio-economic indicators coupled by lack of political influence, makes the population vulnerable to multiple disasters which are manifest in the form of food insecurity, frequent waterborne diseases outbreaks and increased mortality and morbidity rates resulting from HIV/AIDS. The predicament of the district is largely attributed to involuntary displacement in 1957 when people were “bundled into lorries” (WCD, 2000) and forcibly resettled in arid lands during the Kariba dam construction. Before the creation of Lake Kariba in 1957, the life along the Zambezi River was primarily based around riverbank farming, fishing and hunting. The major interest of the colonial government was the collection of hut tax, the protection of wildlife, and ultimately the hydro-electric power that could be generated through the building of Lake Kariba (Scudder, 1971; Colson, 1960, 1971), rather than on the livelihood strategies of the Tonga people. Recognising the need to resolve development problems for Binga, attention was put to improve socio-economic indicators during early years of independence. This included education, health and infrastructural development. However, the development thrust was not as much in Binga as in many other areas. The district remained, and still remains today, trapped in absolute poverty. The situation of the Tonga has been further worsened by the ever deteriorating political and economic situation in the country, characterized by an excessive inflation rate of more than 100 per cent, unemployment rate of more than 70 per cent and dwindling support towards crucial social services such as health and education. In a study conducted by Save the Children (2002) on the livelihoods of commercial sex workers in Binga, poverty and food insecurity were “clearly and unsurprisingly the major driving forces behind the ‘supply’ side of commercial sex work”. Doris Lessing said that the Tonga are “thin and some are stunted and she went

on to advise: “Do not visit the river Tonga, for they will break your heart” (Tremmel *et al.*, 1994, p. 5).

Secondly, I have chosen Binga RDC because of my experience in working with the Binga RDC including as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in the late 1990s. This was the period when there was relative peace in the country with more focus on strengthening of communities which saw the introduction of the Campfire Programme, Rural Development Fund (RDF), Community Action Project (CAP) and Rural District Council Capacity Building Programme (RDCCBP), to name just a few. The paper focuses on the situation prior to year 2000 before the current socio-economic problems Zimbabwe is facing.

The concept of disaster resilience

Disaster resilience is one of the buzzwords that have recently entered the disaster discourse, but its entrance could be seen as a birth of a new culture of dealing with disasters. The outcomes of the 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) confirmed that the concept had been gradually finding more space in both theory and practice in a wide range of disaster risk reduction discourse and some interventions. Terms like “sustainable and resilient communities” “resilient livelihoods” and “building community resilience” have clearly become common terms in journal articles and programme documents. Yet the definition of resilience remains a contested one. Because of the multidisciplinary of the concept, several definitions have been coined especially from geography, sociology, engineering, health, environmental studies and disaster fields. However, most of the definitions view resilience as both a process and outcome. For the purpose of this paper, resilience is the capacity of a system, community or society to cope with, adapt, or “bounce back” by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure in the light of a hazard stress or shock (Mallak, 1998; Wildavsky, 1991; Comfort, 1999; Holling *et al.*, 1995; Paton *et al.*, 2000; Kendra and Wachtendorf, 2003; Pelling, 2003; UNISDR, 2005). This is determined by the degree to which the social system is capable of organising itself to increase the capacity for learning from past disasters for better future protection and to improve risk reduction measures (UNISDR, 2005). The main defining characteristics of resilience include:

- coping with the impacts of disasters;
- recovery from disasters and “bouncing back”; and
- adaptation to cope better with future risks (World Disaster Report, 2004).

There are a number of key success factors for building disaster resilient communities: building on the knowledge, capacities and priorities of people; mainstreaming gender issues in disaster risk reduction; public awareness of disasters; community based disaster reduction and creation of partnership and collaboration (World Disaster Report, 2004), to mention just a few. However, since disasters are, in most cases, a manifestation of unresolved development problems, the development approach to disaster risk reduction, is one of the conduit through which the resilience agenda could be delivered. The local authorities, especially those involved in rural development, have been or will be involved in one way or the other in disaster reduction efforts. RDCs in Zimbabwe, including Binga Rural District Council, have been involved and will continue to be involved in building disaster resilience for their communities.

Disaster resilience as capacity building

Work on disasters in the last ten years has been increasingly focused on the capacity of disaster-affected communities to recover from a disaster with little or no external assistance. This advocates a stronger emphasis on approaches to humanitarian work, risk reduction and development work, which put resilience, rather than just need or vulnerability, at the nucleus of the debate. The adoption of the disaster resilience strategy for the decade 2005-2015 by United Nations Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) also known as “The Hyogo Declaration” is a positive move; in which increased attention will be given to what affected communities can do for themselves and how best to strengthen them (World Disaster Report, 2004). This can be contrasted with vulnerability reduction strategies that are often orientated towards creating an environment of human coping. However, we have learnt that people aspire to more than simply achieving the minimum standards associated with coping, meaning that the adoption of resilience thinking beyond vulnerability reduction is needed. It is recognised increasingly by development practitioners that interventions are more likely to be successful, leading to genuinely positive impacts on human well-being, where the emphasis is on building on local knowledge and existing capacity. This means building on existing resilience is in the affirmative rather than endless needs assessments and reactions to negatives.

The term “capacity building” is sometimes used interchangeably with “institution building” “institutional and organizational development” and “institutional capacity building” (Jones and Blunt, 1999). Capacity building is a process by which individual, organisations, institutions and societies develop abilities to perform functions, solve problems and set and achieve objectives (UNDP, 1997). The common elements of capacity building include:

- the creation of an enabling environment, with appropriate policy and legal frameworks;
- human resource development and the strengthening of managerial systems; and
- institutional development, including community participation (Franks, 1999, p. 52).

Put differently, capacity building therefore refers to overall ability of the individual or group to actually perform the responsibilities and depends on overall size of the tasks, the resources available to perform them, the framework within which they are discharged as well as the individual or group capabilities – knowledge, skills and attitudes (Franks, 1999, p. 52).

Capacity building is not a new concept in RDCs in Zimbabwe. During the 1990-1999 decade, RDCs saw a proliferation of programmes with explicit and implicit capacity building components. The RDCCBP, was explicitly concerned with capacity building while others programmes were only concerned with capacity building to the extent that accepted to channel funds through RDCs rather than bypass them. The Rural Development Fund, District Environmental Action Project (DEAP) and Community Action Project were some of the projects, which had capacity building component as a one of the “cross-cutting issue”. Binga RDC participated in all these programmes with each having a package of projects. The projects were seen as building blocks and addressed wide spectrum of socio-economic projects that were aimed at improving social indicators particularly in education and health. However, these programmes had

a number of limitations. First, the programmes exerted a lot of pressure on limited Binga RDC human resources. Complying with the requirements of more than four uncoordinated programmes by government or donors, meant little time for council staff (Conyers, 2003) to carry out project analyses at the local and district levels. In addition, each programme had different schedules of meetings that were usually called at short notice. Binga RDC being more than 400 kilometres from Bulawayo, the provincial capital, most of the time was spent on commuting between Binga Centre and Bulawayo for meetings. Although provincial “peer reviews” of RDC development plans and projects proved quite useful platforms for sharing best (and worst) practice, district and local levels did not go through such a process because of time and human resources constraints. A number of short-cuts were made in the project management cycle: project identification, appraisal, implementation, monitoring and evaluation fell far short from what was laid down in the project manuals. The “learning by doing process” turned into “learning by doing events” with a risk of eroding the local people’s coping and adaptive strategies. Second, the projects adopted a structural approach; development was conceived in terms of structures: roads, bridges, schools and clinics with little participation of communities. This had a risk of perpetuating the “we know best” syndrome with a possibility of reinforcing the deterministic notion that disadvantaged communities are weak and helpless. The road to sustainability and resiliency is complex and needs a balance between structural and non-structural elements. When constructing structural elements to mitigate disasters, there is need to think of how the community is going to maintain the structure.

Projects aimed at building community resilience, need joint action, rather than competition, by many different actors: grassroots groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private corporations, donors and government agencies (Brown and Ashman, 1996; World Disaster Report, 2004). Unleashing projects and programmes with competing or similar objectives puts the target sector or community under undue duress to meet programme or project requirements. This is likely to reduce, if not destroy, the culture of resilience built over centuries.

Disaster resilience and decentralisation

Decentralisation of authority from central government to local governments is one of the pre-conditions towards building disaster resilient communities (Lewis, 1999; SDAR and FAO, 2005)[1]. As legally constituted sub-national governing units, which supposedly have political, financial and administrative autonomy, local governments are in a better position to deliver the disaster resilience agenda. Being deeply rooted in the communities, or rather, close to community pressures (Stewart, 1986; Smoke, 2003) governments are better placed in increasing local access to public infrastructure, public services and economic opportunities; increasing the empowerment of local actors; and enhancing the sustainability of local development processes (World Bank, 2004).

Local government reform as it relates to decentralisation has been one of the high priorities of the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) since independence in 1980 (Conyers, 2003) as a way of redressing the dual local government system created by the racial divide during the pre-independence administration. The Land Apportionment Act (1930) and Land Husbandry Act (1965) provided a framework work for an apartheid administrative system of rural development (Healy, 2001). As a result two local government systems for rural areas were inherited at independence: Rural Councils

and District Councils serving the interest of white commercial farmers and black communal farmers, respectively. The disparities continued to exist until the amalgamation of the two systems into the single Rural District Council system in 1993.

The decentralisation, which began in the 1980s has seen the creation of hierarchical structures of appointed and elected officials at the province, district and local level as a means of development coordination, democracy and rationalising the public sector (Conyers, 2003). The village, the basic unit, comprises elected Village Development Committees (VIDCOs), which had representatives on the Ward Development Committee (WADCO). The introduction of the Traditional Leaders Act (2000) saw the chief granted the power to appoint village heads to preside over village assemblies. There is however, more confusion at the ward level because of the two structures – the Ward Assembly and WADCO which are presided by the traditional chief and ward councilor, respectively. The ward councilor is elected by members of the ward to represent them at the district level.

Binga Rural District Council (BRDC) comprises 21 elected ward councilors. In addition to VIDCO and WADCO subcommittees, BRDC, like any other RDC in Zimbabwe, has statutory committees that deal with education, health, roads, land use, natural resources and the Rural District Development Committee, which deals with technical issues of the council. The RDDC comprises heads of central government departments and those of nongovernmental organizations and presided by the district administrator (DA). The devolution of powers to RDCs has had some visible positive impacts on the communities. Dozens of projects have been initiated by communities – Siambolo Clinic in Dobola Ward, Malaliya – Manyanda Road in Pashu Ward, Manjolo Secondary School Science Laboratory and BaTonga Museum to name just a few.

However, for BRDC to build disaster resilient communities, it needs (full) autonomy in making decisions on matters that will enhance and diversify livelihood portfolios. Access to natural capital assets: wildlife, land and water, which BRDC is endowed with, are fundamental in breaking the deprivation trap (Chambers, 1997). The Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) has attempted to involve local communities in decision making on managing the wildlife, but the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (DNPWM) still makes final decisions on most important aspects of the programme such as Problem Animal Control (PAC) operation and quota allocation to concession areas. In fact, central government has not devolved rights in wildlife to local communities to the extent where these communities can use these rights to gain an increased stake in the wildlife utilization enterprise at its multiple levels of value. While communities get a share of revenues they have little control over wildlife management, no equity in wildlife utilization, and few opportunities to provide goods or services to the wildlife industry (Murombedzi, 1999).

The failure to evict migrants in the soil-rich Lusulu area since 1980s, provides another example of BRDC's limited autonomy in decision-making. Recognizing the electoral value of migrants as well as the contribution they make to the country's ailing agriculture, senior politicians have castigated BRDC and staunchly supported migrants in their defiance of evictions and defence of their livelihoods (Dzingirai, 2003).

But building resilient communities against disasters requires a wholesome decentralization package: autonomy in policy-making, fiscal and administrative (deconcentration) matters. While decentralization is complex, lengthy and difficult

(Ouedraogo, 2003), and may need to be introduced gradually; gradual need not mean focusing exclusively on one dimension of decentralization first and ignoring others because of the inherent multidimensional linkages (Prud'homme, 2003; Smoke, 2003). While RDCs have been given powers to collect revenue from residents, budgets, like by-laws, are subject to ministerial approval; thus making it difficult for RDCs to make realistic financial plans. What is needed is to give RDCs additional revenue powers (Conyers, 2003) to collect revenue from income earners such as national parks, forests and water resources. BRDC provides an interesting paradox in that the same "rich district" is reeling in absolute poverty. The revenue collected from these resources is shared by the whole nation as part of the "national cake" while the custodians are becoming poorer and poorer. Apologists for such an arrangement view this as a fair way of addressing the equitable distribution of national wealth. Yet BRDC is expected to collect revenue from the poor people to meet its operating costs as well as finance its capital projects. With this scenario, which is not expected to change in the foreseeable future, the dream to build sustainable and resilient livelihoods in the district faced by multiple disasters – food insecurity, HIV/AIDS and malaria, is unlikely to come true by 2015.

Decentralisation of administrative services is yet another stumbling block to building disaster resilient communities in the RDC areas. The RDDC committee is indeed an important technical arm of the BRDC and has to a limited extent made some contributions in this respect. However, RDDC members remain unaccountable to BRDC as they report to central government bureaucracy, an enemy of decentralisation (Hambleton and Hogget, 1985) as it perpetuates political command and control from the centre. The role of the DA is none other than that of presiding over the RDDC meetings and this has little effect on the coordination and accountability in the absence of an institutional framework. The efficacy of sustainable disaster risk management in RDC areas in Zimbabwe depends crucially on the enabling national policy environment, legislative and financial frameworks. Decentralised systems can only be crucial to vulnerability reduction and resilience enhancement when populations are equitably and functionally accommodated and resourced (Lewis, 1999). Piecemeal or rather *ad hoc* decentralisation in fact provides a fertile ground for increasing rather than reducing disaster impacts.

Disaster resilience and the internal organisational structure of RDCs

The internal organisation of RDCs is one of the key factors in the creation of an environment in which more resilient communities can thrive. Factoring in disaster risk reduction measures into development planning will depend to a large extent on the nature of internal organisation. The three pillars of governance: transparency, participation and accountability are important ingredients towards the development planning processes. But these issues are animated by the political environment of the day.

The internal organisation of Binga RDC, like any other RDC in Zimbabwe is built out of the RDC Act (1988), which provides a framework of activities of councillors and paid officers. The work of councillors is structured by meetings: full council, committees and sub-committees. The officers, headed by the chief executive officer (CEO), follow the Weberian bureaucracies organised in hierarchical departments.

Thus, there is a distinction between policy-making and administration, at least on paper.

Binga RDC was one of those districts that started drawing up district development plans in line with Five Year National Development Plans of the 1980s. Binga District Lusumpuko Plan (1981) was an ambitious development plan, which sought to improve the socio-economic indicators of the district. The DA, then the CEO of Binga District Council, as it was then known, was at the centre of the planning process. Although a few councillors were consulted in the process, the planning process largely followed a “predetermined” blueprint approach rather than a process approach where the plan would constantly evolve and adapted not only to be in tandem with spatial and temporary changes but also meet better people’s changing needs. As result the Binga District missed development opportunities especially during early years of independence when rural development was a top priority on the government’s agenda. However, the plan remains as one of the most significant development plans Binga District has ever had.

Drawing inspirations from the Lusumpuko Plan, a number of efforts have been made to help BRDC improve its delivery process. Some of the significant steps include.

The uncompleted ward profile exercise of 1993, which documented the development needs of each ward to form the basis for development planning.

A study in 1994, which produced a framework for land-use and development planning. Among the aspects contained in the framework are those at the core of disaster risk reduction such as capacity building, collaboration and networking, coordination, transparency, participation and accountability in the planning process (Conyers and Mbetu, 1994). At the launch of the framework, the provincial and national levels pledged their support to the development planning innovation, which would be replicated to other RDCs if it were to succeed. A number of task forces were set to look at various aspects of the framework. However, the task forces disappeared into oblivion; *ad hoc* planning became the order of the day.

The Notional Poverty Map of 1998 – a product of the World Bank-funded Poverty Alleviation Programme, in which wards were ranked according to the socio-economic indicators.

The Lake Kariba Combination Master Plan in 1999, from which BRDC would draw a local plan.

Although three year rolling development plan produced in during 1998-2001 period were a significant step towards coming producing development plans, there were a number of visible shortcomings of the process. First, the development plans were RDCCBP-driven and focused on meeting the assessment criteria of the programme than meeting the felt needs of the communities. Second, the plans were desk based and made no reference to the studies mentioned above. Third, while district strategic objectives came out of a debate of stakeholders’ workshop, there was no forum where contents of the plans were debated.

For BRDC, and indeed other RDCs in Zimbabwe, to be effective reducing disaster risk, organisational memory (van der Bent, 1999), mainly resulting from high turnover, seems to be one of the biggest challenge. BRDC has been experiencing high turnover of top management staff throughout the 1990s to early 2000s. The systems that act as repositories of knowledge, irrespective of continued participation of individuals seem

to be inadequate. Staff handover and induction, information systems, follow-up and supervision are among the challenges.

Conclusion

Central to this paper is the recognition that local authorities are an indispensable component in building disaster resilient communities. Being close to community pressures, they are more appropriate in designing long-term solutions to disasters and development problems obtaining in their areas of jurisdiction. These could be captured in the development plans and other local authority activities. Despite this recognition, however, an analysis of RDCs in Zimbabwe reveals several challenges for them to be effective delivery instruments for the disaster resilience agenda, at least to contribute to the attainment of the ambitious MDGs in poverty reduction by 2015.

With capacity building being at the centre of the building community resilience, learning from past attempts to build capacity for RDCs in Zimbabwe, coordination by donors as well as government agencies is fundamental. The circumstances under which RDCs are operating in Zimbabwe, highlights the implicit demand for the government to further consider fiscal and administrative aspects of the decentralisation programme to complete the package. Proffering simply a devolution structure-participation outcome scenario, rather than a complete package, leaves RDCs in a miserable fiscal and administrative position to tackle issues related to long-term disaster risk reduction and sustainable development.

Note

1. SDAR – Rural Institutions and Participation Service; FAO – United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation.

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Corresponding author

S. Bernard Manyena can be contacted at: bernard.manyena@unn.ac.uk