Main Actors, Demystifying the Politics and "Voices from Below"

A Citizens Perspective on Dialogue in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Zimbabwe's multi-faceted crisis has dragged for some time now, most notably since the turn of the new millennium (year 2000). At the centre of the crisis is what many believe is an unending political tussle, which has produced attendant socio-economic challenges for the majority of citizens. Various stakeholders, both within and outside Zimbabwe have called for dialogue to resolve this crisis. The 2018 elections produced an electoral dispute that pits the ruling party Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDCA), further heightening the crisis. Many actors have called for dialogue to resolve the crisis, and as well, the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) has initiated the Political Actors' Dialogue (POLAD) to resolve the political impasse in the country. It is against this background that the Alliance of Community Based Organisations, working towards the realisation of a democratic transition in Zimbabwe, commissioned this research to find out citizens' perspectives on this topic of national importance. Using a qualitative method incorporating a desktop study, focus group discussions and key informant interviews, this study managed to ascertain, the following among other findings: that citizens in the targeted communities view dialogue as the only viable avenue to ending the long-drawn crisis; they view political parties as the "main actors" in such dialogue; but any dialogue should not be exclusively between the political players but should incorporate other key societal actors.

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction and Background

The Alliance of Community Based Organisations (ACBOs or the Alliance) is a consortium platform for networking, peer learning and institutional capacity strengthening of member organizations. It endeavours to devise common strategies for collaboration in enhancing community development work. Furthermore, the Alliance seeks to contribute to the unlocking of democratic space in Zimbabwe and increase the participation of marginalised grassroots communities in shaping and informing the overall democratic transition in Zimbabwe favourably to their interests and those of their communities. The Alliance is currently constituted of 14 community-based organisations working across 29 districts spread across 8 provinces in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe has been embroiled in socio-economic and political crisis that has persisted for some time now, dating back at least to the turn of the millennium. However, even before the post-2000 crisis, there have been various epochs before that have witnessed conflict of varying forms. The early years of independence witnessed such political conflict that resulted in what is widely regarded as a genocide in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces. Further political conflict was fuelled by the worsening economic and social conditions largely resulting from the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), which accentuated dissent and in response the state became increasingly authoritarian. Various conjunctural events at the turn of the millennium precipitated and accentuated this crisis, epitomised by a failing economy, which in turn led to increasing social and political conflict. This increasingly pushed to the bring a restless citizenry in its attempt to make ends meet on the backdrop of an ever-deteriorating economy. While the genesis and drivers of the crisis remain contested, heightened political conflict has often deteriorated into open conflict, with numerous deaths, injuries and destruction of property afflicting communities at different epochs. This has resulted in arrested economic, social and political development which has kept the country's development indicators in the negative. In most instances, such conflict has usually been resolved through dialogue, though a culture of impunity and selective application of the law seems to be also prevalent, hence, further retarding social, economic and political harmony.

Yet, for all the many conflicts that the country has witnessed, dialogue has always been proffered as key to resolving such conflict. As the country currently faces a debilitating crisis, various key individuals and institutions have implored Zimbabweans to find room for dialogue to resolving the crisis. The new ructions in the ruling party's youth league, have also led to the calls for Dialogue between President Emmerson Mnangagwa and Nelson Chamisa of the opposition MDCA. Towards the end of 2019, former South African President, Thabo Mbeki, initiated a process to bring the MDCA and ZANU PF into talks. Retired Colonel Tshinga Dube in his autobiography, "Quiet Flows The Zambezi River", bemoans the lost opportunity during the November 2017 Transition, where Emerson Mnangagwa leader of the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and Morgan Tsvangirayi, leader of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) could have joined hands to work towards a new trajectory. The Speaker of Parliament of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Council of Churches, private sector leaders, various civil society actors, regional and international bodies among many others have called for dialogue between Zimbabwe's leadership to resolve the long standing economic and political crisis facing the country. From these calls, a clear consensus emerges that dialogue is the only way to resolve Zimbabwe's political impasse. However, all these approaches point to a negotiated elite settlement. A further gaze into history shows, there has never been a dialogue process centred on citizens and their perspectives to dialogue as informed by the material conditions under which they subsist in times of crisis. The forms and nature of dialogue that have taken place before, have usually been limited to the major political actors, 'the elite'; largely, excluding the general citizenry, for whom such dialogue is ostensibly held to assist.

It is against this background that the ACBOs commissioned this research to seek to understand citizens' views on such a topic of national importance. Most importantly, is to also seek to understand from the citizens how the much talked about dialogue can better be directed to sustainably address the myriad issues affecting their communities and the country. Many questions abound on this issue of dialogue: who shall convene the dialogue? Who should be at the table? What issues should they dialogue on? And what are the sought outcomes? Is there scope for citizen participation in such dialogue? As a network of community-based organisations rooted in the often excluded and marginalised communities, it was in the interests of the ACBOs to profile the voices from the communities that we work in, in an attempt to answering these key questions on dialogue.

It is out of a reading of these "voices from below" and Zimbabwe's history of dialogue that the Alliance proffers a contribution to this national issue; and profiling and amplifying these "voices from below", very often excluded from such key national processes.

1.1 Crisis, conflict and dialogue in Zimbabwe: a historical perspective

Since 1980, Zimbabwe has witnessed various epochs of conflicts and intervals of dialogues. In all these epochs, conflict the has mainly been between the ruling party and major opposition of the time. The conflicts have tended to manifest through open violence and in the process ending up undermining socio-economic development. Eppel and Raftopoulos (2008:2) observe that the post-colonial context has seen the accentuation of militarist forms of nationalist struggles and the monopolisation of the state by the ruling party which have given rise to a new round of human rights abuses, which builds on the authoritarian legacy of settler rule. Where crisis has resulted in open conflict, sometimes leading to death of citizens, destruction of property and undermining of property rights, it has often times been resolved through dialogue. Such dialogue has however varied in scope, specific objectives beyond just ending the conflict, as well as its outcomes. Four epochs where conflict has been resolved through dialogue are considered here.

1.1.1. The Second Chimurenga and the Lancaster House talks

Perhaps, the most significant conflict in the history of the country that ended through a dialogue process and ushered in majority rule is the Lancaster House Conference talks; it stands out both in terms of significance and outcome. Various human rights abuses during the colonial period were generated in the long struggles between the violent structural exclusions of settler colonial ideology and practice, and the often intolerant assertions for unity by a nationalist movement that was "majoritarian without qualification" (Ranger, 2003:21 cited in Eppel and Raftopoulos, 2008:2). After a protracted liberation war waged by the armed wings of ZANU and ZAPU and aided by the masses against colonial white minority Rhodesian government, the increasing death toll from the war prompted increasing calls from various quarters on the need for dialogue. According to the Jesuit Institute (2018), it also took the advice and persuasion from some figures in the Catholic Church to persuade leading figures amongst the liberation movements that the only way to end the Rhodesian Bush War was through a negotiated settlement. The Frontline States, a key benefactor and supporter of the liberation struggles not only in Zimbabwe but across the continent, began to increasingly push for dialogue in resolving the conflict. It would eventually

take the role of the former colonial power Britain through Lord Carrington, to broker the talks which were also supported by various other international actors. After hard compromises on both sides, the dialogue efforts yielded positive results that culminated in the first elections of 1980 and the attainment of independence on April 18 of the same year. A key point to note about this dialogue and the eventual compromises made on both sides, was the role played by the international community, in 'scaffolding' the arrangement and commitments agreed via the dialogue.

1.2.1 Gukurahundi and the Unity Accord

In the early years of independence, the country was to encounter a crisis that resulted in political conflict. This culminated in the deaths of a reported 20 000 civilians in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces and mainly targeted the Ndebele minority. The genesis of this largely political conflict traces back to 1963, after the splitting of ZAPU into two parties; ZAPU and ZANU, which deepened in the late 1970s (Raftopoulos and Savage, eds., 2004:44). Suspicion and distrust between the armed wings of the parties during the process of integration into a national post-independence army led to clashes and allegations of caching arms and in November 1980 and February 1981, violence broke out, resulting in deaths, arrests and imposition of curfews (Raftopoulos and Savage, eds., 2004:44). As the dominant party in the new post-colonial state, ZANU sought to extend its power through, among others, a strategy of *Gukurahundi,* which entailed violent and physical elimination of enemies and opponents (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012). This targeted ZAPU, which was the largest opposition political party at the time, and largely affected citizens of Ndebele ethnicity, mainly in the Matabeleland and Midlands regions. Again, it took dialogue, spanning a number of years, and eventually the signing of the Unity Accord of December 22 1987 between ZANU and ZAPU as the protagonists. The resolution of the conflict took direct dialogue between the protagonists, with the facilitatory or mediatory role of the church in Zimbabwe and the late President Canaan Sodindo Banana. from a third party. The late president Mugabe described this as "a moment of madness", even though there has been no truth, justice and reconciliation process, appoint that remains one of the main criticism of this settlement pact.

1.1.3 The disputed 2008 election and the SADC-mediated talks

In 2008, Robert Mugabe lost the first round of the presidential elections to Morgan Tsvangirai of the MDC-T. According to Kebonang (2012:28),

In an attempt to hold onto power, the Zimbabwean government, acting first through the Zimbabwean Electoral Commission (ZEC) and then state security apparatus, not only caused the with-holding of the 29th March 2008 Presidential election results won by Morgan Tsvangirai of the opposition Movement of Democratic Change (MDC) but in finally releasing them, unleashed a campaign of violence and terror against supporters and activists of the opposition MDC thereby forcing the party to pull-out of the scheduled 27 June 2008 run-off presidential elections.

The results of the 29 March poll took more than thirty days before being released, with the announcement that no candidate had polled the 50% +1 threshold, necessitating a run-off election. A nation-wide orgy of violence to subdue the opposition eventually saw Robert Mugabe contest the election as a lone candidate, claiming 90.22% of the vote (Veritas, 2008). However, the election lacked any legitimacy and was rejected by both SADC and the AU, who then called for dialogue, which was facilitated by then South African president Thabo Mbeki on behalf of SADC. This time around, the dialogue was facilitated under the ambit of a regional bloc, SADC, with Mbeki as the designated facilitator. On the dialogue table, were three parties that represented the outcome of the March 2008 parliamentary elections results. The dialogue gave the country a political solution to the crisis in the form of a government of national unity (GNU). However, despite stabilising an economy which had virtually collapsed, the GNU dismally performed in terms of coming up with reforms for a sustainable resolution to the multi-faceted crisis, for which it had ostensibly been formed. After a five-year tenure between 2009 and 2013, the GNU delivered yet another contested election in 2013, whose manipulation however, was a turning point in terms of a change from brute force to technical manipulation of elections (Chirimambowa, et al, 2019, forthcoming on the technical manipulation of elections.)

1.1.4 Dialogue during the 'military-assisted transition'

In October 2017, then vice president Emmerson Mnangagwa was dismissed from his post by then president Robert Mugabe in what was widely seen as part of the factional contestations in the ruling ZANU PF party. In the wake of his dismissal, Mnangagwa fled the country to neighbouring South Africa via Mozambique, before releasing a statement in which he told Zimbabweans that he would return in two weeks to lead them. On the 16th of November, the army through then Commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces announced the launch of Operation Restore Legacy, whose publicly stated main aim was to 'remove criminals surrounding President Mugabe'. In the

days that followed, the army deployed military tanks and other armoured vehicles at strategic places across the country, keeping President Mugabe under house arrest. This political crisis that ensued as the military-assisted transition (read coup) was underway also saw some concerted efforts at dialogue between the protagonists in the debacle – the army and then president Mugabe. This time, the dialogue was brokered by individuals close to the protagonists, with a member of the clergy Father Fidelis Mukonori of the Catholic Church playing a leading role. As Pollitt (2017) notes, it intrigued the world when a Catholic cleric appeared as a key player when Zimbabwe's future hung in the balance during that month of November in 2017. Again, an elite compromise, aided by a choreographed citizens' march as well as an impending impeachment process through parliament, eventually led to the resignation of president Mugabe. This eventually paved the way for Mnangagwa to return and assume the presidency on the 24th of November 2017.

Mnangagwa's return and assumption of the presidency had people believing that the multi-faceted crisis could now be resolved, given how the Zimbabwean crisis had come to be identified with President Mugabe. An impending election, eventually held in July 2018, was also seen as much a litmus test as it presented an opportunity to address the political question, arising from what was widely seen as a manipulated election in 2013 which signalled the end of the tenure of the GNU. That election was again to be disputed and the protests that resulted would lead to the death of six civilians on 1 August 2018 after soldiers shot at fleeing protesters.

1.2 Dialogue and conflict resolution: a conceptual framework

Zimbabwe is a nation with a poor tolerance for political diversity (Raftopoulos, and Savage, eds., 2004) and a deep history of bitter political conflict which has often resulted in death, arson and rape (Paganga, 2019:9). Such political conflict has often extended to affect and arrest both social and economic development, and the overall human development of citizens in their communities. The violence which often accompanies political conflict has dire and negative consequences to societal development and democracy. In such violent contexts, democracy is compromised; a situation which necessitates some form of conflict resolution for a return to democracy (Tarusarira and Ganiel, 2016). Conflict, though an inevitable aspect of human and social relations, often exceeds such bounds as to result in open or violent conflict. Its sustainable resolution in such instances can only be achieved through a long term resolution that is based on an understanding

of its underlying causes (Okla and Aduloju, 2018). Such an approach has better chances of achieving a more sustainable outcome in terms of assuring that there is no resurgence of such conflict (Okla and Aduloju, 2018). While the genesis and intensity of major conflicts in post-colonial Zimbabwe have differed at each different epoch, their resolution has seen dialogue as a key tool adopted by the political parties to resolve (Paganga, 2019:9). For Catto-Ramusino (2009), key to the success of any dialogue or negotiation is that each party perceives the result as a victory. However, given outcomes of previous epochs of dialogue, the sustainability of these outcomes has increasingly been called into question, as the crisis has tended to repeat in a cyclic fashion. From the lessons that such history has bequeathed to us, there are a number of issues that are worth considering as fundamental to the success or failure of any dialogue. The following are key:

1.2.1 What are the issues? And sought outcomes?

The issues to be tabled for dialogue in Zimbabwe can derive from two perspectives. Firstly, is to address the issues that result in conflict, the underlying causes. Secondly, will be to address the adverse effects that result from such conflict. The former most likely answers the political question that drives political conflict in the first place while the latter spans both the political and socio-economic effects that accrue as a result of such conflict.

At an outcome level and to answer the political question, the Platform for Concerned Citizens (PCC) proffer the following as key to the addressing the political conundrum:

> …adherence to the constitution and institutionalizing the principles of constitutionalism; reform of key institutions that impede the above; and reform of the electoral process, to create conditions for genuinely free and fair, elections, and devoid of all controversy… (Mandaza and Reeler, 2019:2).

On the economic front, which probably answers the socio-economic challenges that have resulted from the political conflict, the PCC advocates for stabilising of the economy and the setting in place of an Economic Reform Agenda aimed at the following:

> …debt management, and recovery of misappropriated assets, nationally and internationally; comprehensive macro-economic fundamentals; policy consistency; land policy and property rights; revival of productive sectors; mobilizing the diaspora into the economic life of the country… (Mandaza and Reeler, 2019:3).

1.2.2 What is the ideal framework?

Perhaps the key word for a framework for any dialogue in Zimbabwe as informed by lessons from past dialogue is 'inclusivity'. The framework here will probably be determined by the sought outcomes of such dialogue as well as the feasible and available avenues to the actualisation of key outcomes. This, as the outcomes pertain to what broadly enables genuine reforms around the political questions as much as they also address the socio-economic challenges wrought by the political. Different stakeholders have proffered various ways on a framework for dialogue as evidenced by current initiatives to get different stakeholders on the table: the PCC has been clear with their National Transitional Authority (NTA) proposal; the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) and its Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD) and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches have been more benign in proffering a more direct and implementable proposals on a workable framework for dialogue.

1.2.3 Who mediates/convenes/facilitates?

This presents a key factor to the success or failure of any dialogue process. A worldwide scholarly view is of mediation as intervention in a dispute with a view to resolving it. As past dialogue has shown, interventions to resolve Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis would require an impartial mediator who understands the historicity of this crisis (Nkomo, 2019:3). The choice of who facilitates such dialogue will obviously be contested though the role of regional blocs, in this case SADC and the AU, is key, given the deep-seated nature of the Zimbabwean crisis and its recent internationalization by SADC through its anti-sanctions initiative.

1.2.4 Who should be at the table?

Nkomo (2019:5) asserts that the key stakeholders to Zimbabwe's much anticipated dialogue are the people of Zimbabwe in their diversified values and beliefs; thus any framework for dialogue and agenda thereto cannot be set without their input and wholesale participation. Any framework for dialogue to achieve sustainable reforms must have space for citizens as defined through key institutions including political parties, business/the private sector, traditional leaders, the church, academia and civil society in its numerous organic representations. Dialogue amongst political players alone has in the past failed to achieve sustainable outcomes, with the GNU the clearest example of the shortcomings of dialogue solely between political actors.

1.3 Mapping the current context

In November 2017, Zimbabwe underwent a leadership change at the top which saw the late former president Robert Mugabe deposed in through a process which has been generally termed a 'military assisted transition' but others have called a coup. He was replaced by his former deputy Emmerson Mnangagwa who assumed office on the promise of bringing a new way of administering the state and running the country, espoused through the "New Dispensation" and "Zimbabwe is open for business" mantra. While a significant proportion of the citizenry had hoped for a genuine change from the polarised politics of patronage and corruption pursued under Mugabe, this increasingly began to fade away as the nation prepared for the 30 July 2018 elections. True to its authoritarian nature, the Zanu PF government continued its strategy of electoral manipulation to retain power. A disputed election followed on 30 July 2018, which was only resolved through the Constitutional Court. However, the election was blighted by the shooting of 6 civilians on August 1 2018, as citizens protested against the delay of releasing results, a move interpreted as an attempted hatchet job to 'stealing' the election. This reading supports assertions Iliff (2010:1) argument that the contemporary Zimbabwean crisis is broadly characterised by a violent campaign to retain political power on the part of the ZANU PF.

In the wake of the 2018 disputed election, the country has again witnessed an accentuation of the political and economic crisis, reminiscent of the 2007/2008 period where the Zimbabwe crisis peaked, and was eventually resolved after the cobbling and signing of the Global Political Agreement (GPA). At the heart of the current crisis is the disputed 30 July 2018 election which has coincided with a deterioration of the economy. This has seen a number of protests from citizens, civic and professional groups, and the opposition but all these actions have been met with heavy handedness by the state security agencies. Former South African President, Thabo Mbeki characterised the Zimbabwe crisis to be a result of disputed elections and hence the need for dialogue to cure the elusive legitimacy. The deteriorating economy has also coincided with a drought and food shortages, with allegations of the ruling ZANU PF party increasingly using food aid as a political weapon.

As all this is unfolding, there are growing calls from various quarters, both within and outside Zimbabwe for the convening of dialogue as a panacea to rescuing the increasingly dire

situation. The two major political parties in Zimbabwe are themselves agreed on the need for dialogue, each with their own pre-conditions. Various civil society organisations such as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches have also called for and are actually leading a dialogue process, though it is still to garner wide acceptance from the major political parties. Even the private (business and corporate) sector, which usually distances itself from such topics have added their voice to the need for dialogue. The NPRC has also instituted some dialogue under the ambit of POLAD, bringing together the majority of presidential aspirants in the 2018 elections, but the MDC-Alliance has snubbed and questioned the sincerity of this process. In the region, South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) has also given the most latest and clearest signal that Zimbabwe's challenges can only be resolved through national dialogue. Outside the ambit of the SADC and AU as collective bodies, several African heads of state have made their voices known regarding the need for dialogue. The European Union (EU), the United States (US) and other Western states have also weighed in on the need for dialogue in Zimbabwe.

Yet, for all the challenges facing the country, there is general consensus on the need for dialogue from both within and outside Zimbabwe. If it does happen, this would not be the first time a national crisis would have been diffused through dialogue. However, key questions arise on this issue of dialogue, most informed by lessons from previous dialogues held in Zimbabwe and whether the proposed frameworks can resolve the long standing electoral legitimacy question. Key issues around this revolve around the elite nature of previous dialogue and its sustainability. Political elites have always found themselves making compromises, centred more on power-sharing than genuine and sustainable resolution of the grievances and issues pertinent to the citizens. The current situation presents a familiar trajectory, where calls for dialogue have focused more on the electoral dispute between Zanu PF and the MDC-Alliance. However, the current crisis clearly transcends beyond the electoral dispute and its resolution can only be sustainably attained through a more robust and inclusive dialogue framework.

1.4 General study objective
The research comes as part of on-going efforts by the ACBOs to profile the voices of citizens in critical issues that have a bearing not only on their communities, but the nation at large. The study

rests on the assumption that dialogue presents the best avenue to unlocking the democratic transition in Zimbabwe and extricating the country from the multi-faceted crises that currently afflicting it. This study thus sought at a general level, to encourage citizens to share their perspective on dialogue as key to unlocking the stalled democratic transition in Zimbabwe.

1.4.1 Specific objectives

In meeting the general objective, the study specifically sought

- To gather citizens' perspectives on various aspects on the issue of dialogue.
- To inform ACBOs' recommendations on a way forward on dialogue, directly informed through structured research and genuine voices from the community.
- To impart research skills to participating ACBOs members.

1.5 Expected outcomes

The expected outcomes of the study are:

- A concise summary of citizens' perspective on dialogue.
- Evidence-based recommendations on dialogue and its role in unlocking the democratic transition in Zimbabwe.
- Practical application of research by ACBOs members.

1.6 Research questions

In achieving the above objectives and meeting its purpose, the research asked the critical question: what nature of dialogue can help to unlock the stalled democratic transition in Zimbabwe? In answering this key question, it became imperative for the research to pose further:

- Is dialogue necessary?
- What issues should be discussed? What are the sought outcomes to these issues?
- Who should convene/facilitate the dialogue? Who should be at the table? At what level should dialogue happen?

2. Methodology

2.1 How We Got Here?

The research adopted a qualitative methodology to gather and documents' citizens' perspectives on dialogue in Zimbabwe. The study was based on a descriptive , rapid cross-sectional survey methodology, which was preferred as it presented an opportunity of quickly gathering data on the perceptions of ordinary Zimbabweans on the issue of Dialogue. Respondents were purposively sampled drawing on the networks of participating ACBOs members. The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. Desktop and documentary analysis provided the key method for collecting secondary data, which was aided through fieldwork enumeration done through key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGDs).

A total of thirteen community-based members of the Alliance participated in the research. Each members had a target of four FGDs and five KIIs within their area of operation. At every site, the FGDs were disaggregated by age and gender as follows; 18-35 Male, 18-35 Female, 36+ Male and 36+Female, and these averaged 7-10 participants. The key informant interviews targeted key voices in the communities and were drawn from the following social groups; businesspersons, farmers, traditional leaders, civil servants (nurses, teachers, extension workers), church leaders, ward political party leaders, informal traders and women.

The study also relied heavily on the use of secondary data as source for the historicization of the dialogue process in Zimbabwe. This secondary data included academic literature on Zimbabwe's political history, NGO and civil society organisation reports as well as international development agencies reports on the subject of dialogue and transition. In as much as the study sought to be very thorough and extensive, it was a case study and used purposive sampling and snowballing to recruit respondents, hence the findings cannot be claimed to be representative. However, the findings may provide a nuanced understanding of the thoughts and ideas of ordinary community members whose voices are usually drowned by those of elites on issues of critical national importance. At best the study provides some insights and indicative inferences of subaltern voices in critical national discourses.

2.2 Data Analysis

The data collected as part of the study was organized thematically and qualitatively analysed using the key research questions as the lenses of analysis. The triangulated data sources enabled

crosschecking of facts and emerging issues in the study and this strengthened the study validity. Emerging issues from the data analysis are reported in the next section.

3. Findings from the Study

3.1 Political, Economic and Social Context

The political environment is highly polarised and tense, thus making it difficult for communities to freely express themselves. The intense contestation between ZANU PF and the MDC and their entrenched positions has filtered down into the communities making it difficult to push a non-partisan and inclusive development agenda. Development programmes are accepted or rejected on the basis of party politics and not on how they may or may not benefit the people. There was a climate of fear in the communities visited and people seemed not ready to talk of anything political. Even some of the key informants were hesitant to openly speak, at times declining to answer some of the questions or exercising self-censorship. It had to take some great amount of probing to get responses. There were also reports of traditional leaders and political party leadership intimidating people. This politicisation of communities has transcended virtually into all spheres of community life and has also led to the politicisation of humanitarian aid. Communities have been complaining of partisan distribution of food and farming inputs by the leadership.

The ever rising cost of commodities was cited to be giving a majority of citizens in the communities challenges in accessing basic goods and services. This has severely constrained the livelihoods of the people. The welfare of the people has become negative with a lot of people now depending on irregular and meagre incomes. People are mainly deriving their livelihoods from the following sources:

- Humanitarian food hand-outs
- Remittances from the Diaspora
- Informal trading
- Market gardening and horticulture

The situation in most communities is indicative of a dire situation, a point the United Nations has also made in its assessment of the food security situation. It is reported that the United

Nations estimates that more than 5 million people, close to a third of the population, will need food aid (BBC, 2019).

The communities visited are characterised by high levels of poverty and this has been worsened by the country's unending economic crisis. Respondents complained of the high cost of accessing health services with some service providers demanding payment in United States Dollars. It was also reported that there is a rising number of school drop outs and teen prostitution, which has seen low and erratic attendance in schools as the economic hardships bite the ordinary people. While there have been safety net programmes for children in schools, there are reports of their abuse by those in authority. For instance, there were allegations of teachers abusing school feeding programs at the expense of disadvantaged children.

3.2 Why dialogue? - We need to demystify the "politics"

The respondents were of the view that there is the need for dialogue in Zimbabwe and it is the most practical way of resolving the political and economic impasse. They strongly felt that dialogue will help in charting a shared vision within communities, itself a prerequisite to aid in bringing unity and community development since it has become difficult to operate in the communities without interference from political gatekeepers. A good number of respondents were also hopeful that dialogue may assist in enhancing gender equality as the polarised and conflict laden environment has worked against the inclusion of women in leadership. In addition, respondents noted that dialogue has to take place to assist with "demystifying politics". They were of the view that the word "politics" has become too soiled to such an extent that it now scares citizens from civic and public affairs.

3.3 What are the issues? - *Address the "Politics"*

The need to address political contestation came out strongly in the interviews with a majority of community members. One key informant quipped, "*Address the politics and it shall be well*". It was noted that there is a need for an all-encompassing process to address electoral reforms, noting how elections have been at the center of political contestation in Zimbabwe. It was observed that the reason why the country is currently stuck in a post-election political paralysis, was primarily because of the contested elections of July 2018. A look at the history of elections in Zimbabwe

will point to protracted post-election disputes and especially after the year 2000. The need to address the partisan nature of governance and public administration institutions was also highlighted. It was argued that the partisan discharge of duty has been promoting corruption and exclusion of needy people. The health delivery system was also raised as one area that needs dialogue to ensure that health is easily accessible to people. Taking into account that this study was conducted at a time when the public health system has been paralysed by a nation-wide strike by government doctors, this possibly explains its specific mention amongst the political issues.

3.4 Who Should Talk? - Main Actors; Independent Voices and Change Agents

When asked the key question on who should dialogue, the communities gave a broad array of actors. The following groups were highlighted as key to any dialogue process: political parties; CBOs; churches; students and youths; women and traditional leaders. Whilst this list may not be exhaustive or conclusive, it indicates a broad spectrum that covers some of the key actors within communities, both urban and rural. Respondents advanced a number of different set of reasons on why they had chosen the groups that they have highlighted. However, there was a strong feeling that political parties were the key actors to the 'Zimbabwean Crisis' hence they were characterised as the "**main actors in the crisis**"; a juxtaposition to cinema where there are main actors being key to the story-line. This indicates that communities and their members have a nuanced understanding and appreciation of the current crisis – generally that at its core is a political crisis, whose resolution requires the participation of this group of actors. Thus, in the views of many, for the crisis to be solved, political parties have to play a central role and begin to talk to each other. This observation by respondents is very close to reality as signified by the protracted debate of 'President Mnangagwa's legitimacy' between the MDC-Alliance and ZANU PF. The long-drawn stand-off between these major parties has on many occasions led to the disruption of legislative business as the MDC-A has persistently refused to stand up in honour of the president in parliament and at times walked out or boycotted his addresses (New Zimbabwe, 2019) claiming that he is illegitimate. In retaliation cabinet ministers have also started to refuse to answer questions from MDC-A legislators (Chibamu, 2019) and with ZANU PF legislators also refusing to attend parliamentary portfolio committees under the chair of the MDC-A (Matanhike and Matenga, 2019) until they recognise the legitimacy of President Mnangagwa as the appointing authority. This impasse has brought some sort of paralysis to legislative business despite that parliament is key to

providing legislative oversight to the executive. Therefore, the importance of political parties cannot be understated hence them being christened the "Main actors of the Zimbabwe Crisis".

In as much as the communities felt that political parties were central to the crisis in the country, they also noted that there is a need for independent voices, hence the need to include CBOs as they in most cases, offer non-partisan platforms championing community development, as representative of these grassroots communities. To broaden the talks, respondents also called for the inclusion of women and youths/students as these were thought to constitute the majority of the country's population (women are reported to be 52% and youth +/- 66% of the population) and that they are natural change agents. To ensure inclusion of special needs groups, respondents called for extending the invitation to the disabled. In addition, for those respondents from the rural areas, there were also calls to invite traditional leaders to the talks since they considered the custodians of culture. Communities were also of the view that for the talks to be stable and focussed they needed the church to provide moderation and academics for guidance and intellectual direction. The parties that the communities felt were important are summarised in the table below including the reasons why they should come to the table.

WHO?	WHY?
Political parties	Main actors in the crisis
CBOs	Independent voice\voice of reason
Church	Moderation
Students\Youth	Change agents
Women	Demographics – constitute the majority of the population
Traditional Leaders	Custodian of culture
Disabled	Special needs
Academics	Provide intellectual insight

Table 1: Summary of actors who should dialogue
Source: Authors

In essence, the communities interviewed recognised the quantum and significant weight of political parties, in particular, ZANU PF and MDC-A but they were not oblivious to the pitfalls of

two-actors dialogue process; hence, the calling for the broadening of this process as well outlining the potential benefits of doing so.

Therefore it can be observed that whilst political parties are described as the 'main actors to the crisis' and them needing to talk, the communities were conscious of the need to broaden the talks to include other key sectors to ensure inclusivity. This realisation is perhaps also a lesson from history, particularly the 2008 SADC meditated dialogue, whose exclusivity to political actors was cited as one of the reasons its failed to ensure wholesale reforms as had been envisaged in the Global Political Agreement (GPA).

3.5 Who convenes/facilitates?

A good number of respondents were of the view that the church has a significant role to play in the facilitation of the dialogue. The church was found a suitable possible convenor because they are perceived to be neutral and as having the moral campus and possibly high ground to bring the warring parties together. The calls for the church to convene and facilitate the dialogue are in sync with the historical role of the church in trying to break political impasses in Zimbabwe. Interesting to note is that the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) has already began an initiative where they are trying to bring the different actors in Zimbabwe to the table. Similarly, the Catholic Church has also been visible through its various affiliates, in trying to broker dialogue between the state and numerous protagonists.

In addition to the above, a suggestion of co-chairing by the stakeholders was made. This proposition cited the COPAC process where there was co-chairing by the political parties up until the constitution was produced. Therefore, there would be the need to identify who are the key stakeholders to this dialogue and the interests that they carry. This means that out of the proposition a model where the church becomes the convenor of the dialogue and the key-stakeholders co-chair may be the way to go in resolving the political and economic crisis in the country. It is important to note that the suggested solutions on the convening and facilitating the dialogue point to local actors. This makes an interesting observation given that the communities believe the convenors or facilitators of dialogue should be local and already the major two political parties, ZANU PF and MDC-A have also made pronouncements on who should mediate the dialogue. The MDC-A has

made a position that without a foreign mediator there will be no dialogue while ZANU PF has also made a position that there should be no foreign mediators.

3.6 Suggested Dialogue Outcomes

Communities were asked on what should be the outcomes of the dialogue or what should the dialogue seek to achieve and they made the following propositions:

- Unity and consensus
- Stabilisation of economy
- Political tolerance and respect
- Community healing

From the suggestions made, it is clear that breaking the current political and economic impasse is a key concern for most citizens in the communities. The issues of political tolerance, unity and community healing speak to the long periods of violence and conflict within the communities. This is exacerbated by the apparent impunity which perpetrators of past episodes of violence seem to enjoy, thus pointing to unresolved issues of national healing. Dialogue should therefore be able to assist communities to heal from the past and this is not surprising as there are still communities in Zimbabwe that still bear scars and wounds yet to heal from the country's history of violence. The stabilisation of the economy speaks to the impact of the economic crisis on the lives of ordinary people, hence it being key on the intended outcomes of the dialogue. This means that beyond coming up with a political settlement, those working on dialogue have to think of an economic recovery deal for the country.

3.7 At what level? – "the ideal nature of dialogue"

The communities were of the view that the dialogue should be broad and not limited to the 'political elites'. They advocated a process that takes dialogue to all levels of society right up to the communities. In fact they motivated that the nature of the dialogue should take the COPAC approach and have dialogue meetings on the issues that communities want to be solved and the proposed solutions to address the raised concerns. The calls for a broader dialogue process and one that is decentralised may provide a poser to the current dialogue initiatives in Zimbabwe. There is already the POLAD process and the church-led (ZCC) initiative attempting to bring warring

parties together to resolve the political and economic impasse in the country. A lot of observers have however pointed out the elitist nature of such talks, whose primary focus seems to be political parties. As history has shown us, a more inclusive dialogue framework may just help in ensuring that any intended dialogue and its intended outcomes are able to address and speak to the issues of citizens in the communities, through a process that is also inclusive of such communities.

3.8 Role of citizens

The communities were asked if they saw a role for them to play in the dialogue process and how it would look like? The answer was in the affirmative and they proffered mainly the reasons provided in the table below.

Do you have a role?	Why?
Yes- significant role	- Promote community cohesion and consensus building - Community tolerance, reconciliation and development.

For the respondents, they felt that they could play a key role in ensuring the dialogue process addresses the issue of community cohesion and consensus, key ingredients for having sustainable results.

4. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

Based on the focus group discussions held with communities and key informant interviews with key stakeholders the following conclusions are made:

o The crisis has led to a worsening and debilitating socio-politico-economic environment, hitting most hard people's access to livelihoods and basic social services. The ordinary citizen in Zimbabwe is barely surviving, living between a rock and hard place.

o There is consensus within the Zimbabwean society that dialogue is the preferred route to solve the political impasse and resultant crisis in the country.

o In as much as the nature of crisis is perceived to be political, communities anticipate the dialogue to go beyond the political question and address the socio-economic questions of access to basic services and livelihood opportunities.

- The communities identified ZANU PF and the MDC Alliance as the main protagonists in the Zimbabwe crisis, hence their participation is deemed central to the dialogue if any positives are to yield from the process. However, they are also of the view that there is need to broaden any dialogue to include other societal actors, such as civil society, churches and business. It should also be nuanced enough to be inclusive of other socially marginalised groups including people living with disability, women and the youth.
- The communities believe that the dialogue should be convened locally, with a significant majority proposing this to be convened by the church, whilst there is also the possibility of co-chairing.
- It is important for the communities that the dialogue achieves the following: Stabilisation of economy; unity and consensus, political tolerance and respect and community healing.
- The communities are of the view that the dialogue process should be broad enough and not limited to elites alone.

5. Recommendations

Based on the above observations, the following recommendations are proposed:

- All parties interested in the resolution of the Zimbabwe crisis should actively seek the route of dialogue.
- The current dialogue initiatives need to be expanded beyond the political question to include the social and economic questions. The stabilisation of the economy is to be made a key component of seeking sustainable dialogue solutions.
- Civil society needs to initiate a process of gathering the views of citizens and ensure that these find their way onto the national dialogue agenda.
- For the advocates of dialogue, there is need to bring the main parties, ZANU PF and MDC Alliance, to the table but at the same time create room for other key societal stakeholders such as civil society organisations, church and business.

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