Are Minimum Qualifications for Local Councillors Panacea?

By

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That local councillors are crucial to ensure good local governance and development is beyond dispute and cannot be overemphasised. The current crop of elected councillors has been found wanting in all facets of local government, be it corporate governance issues and quality service delivery. What is the real problem? Is the political system a problem? Are the councillors not qualified for the job?

In this article, the authors will attempt to unpack the issue of setting minimum academic qualifications for Zimbabwean councillors, while also critiquing the policy framework under which the councillors have to operate as provided in various pieces of legislation governing the running and administration of local authorities.

The major crisis that the local authorities have is that the councillors are not doing what the electorate put them into office to do. Throughout all the local authorities in Zimbabwe, there is tellingly and persuasively evident of poor judgment that has uncovered the pitiable calibre of politicians the electorate has catapulted into the local authorities. There is massive corruption in almost all local authorities. However, this problem is now institutionalised in Zimbabwe. Indeed, Zimbabwe is now facing the real danger of becoming a culturally corrupt and fraudulent nation. The penchant for luxury is regrettable. There is something wrong with the Zimbabwean political system. As a nation we need to address this problem and we cannot continue harvesting thorns from the current crop of councillors. There is chronic corruption in local authorities which has contributed significantly to poverty, inequality, miss-targeting and inefficiency in social spending programmes.

There are three possible explanations for these undesirable scenarios:

- The councillors joined local authorities with virtually no experience and expertise in local governance, especially how to relate with the citizenry;
- The quality of councillors in analysing legislation and the budget is extremely poor. They cannot unpack the relevant pieces of legislation, i.e. Urban Councils Act Chapter 29:15, the Regional, Town and Country Planning Act Chapter 29:12 and Rural District Council Act Chapter 29:13; and
- The dearth of policy formulation and budget analysis skills and competencies in the local authorities is deplorable.

Recently, the Local Government Rural and Urban Development Minister, Dr Ignatius Chombo expressed his dismay at the performance of the local councillors when he told the media during his end of 2012 statement that:

"As we move forward, it is our view that there is merit in introducing some minimum educational qualifications for councillors with the view of enhancing their craft literacy and competence. With respect to performance of 2012 local authorities' budgets, we noted with concern that most budgets performed at levels below 50% due to various reasons".
Implied and gleaned from the Minister’s statements is that councillors lack capacity i.e. the ability to conceptualise, formulate, manage and evaluate policies, programmes of action, monitor and evaluate the use of all municipal resources be they financial, human and capital. It is important for councillors to have diverse capacities in order to effectively:

- Formulate and design implementable policies that may address socio-economic problems;
- Represent the interests of the electorates and mobilise local energy and resources;
- Adopt a broader view of the needs and potential of their wards as whole communities and not as fragmented entities;
- Utilise and understand local authorities’ governance and implementation structures, systems and procedures in executing the various provisions of legislation, rules and regulations governing local authorities; and
- Have a sufficient grasp of technical and professional issues to make a meaningful policy contribution.

It must be noted and understood that councillors by nature are not full time employees of local authorities, but should be well-versed with the issues at hand. What is the general role of a councillor? Most councillors do not know what councillors must do and they take the responsibility as a full time job to earn a regular income, accumulate wealth and politically meddle in the implementation of their own decisions yet technical experts have been engaged to implement decisions and policies.

A councillor provides a fundamental interface between the local authority and the community which he/she serves. Generally, a councillor must wear three hats namely:

- Committee member (a council has various committee that supervises the work of different council departments, where every councillor is obliged to be a member of a selected committee(s));
- Representative (for the electorate, usually carrying the voice of the party that won in the respective ward); and
- Individual and collective responsibilities for the council’s activities (council’s decisions are binding on all councillors, irrespective of individual opinions. Each councillor has to be accountable for their individual actions that affect council business.)

Implied here is that they perform policy overview and scrutiny, executive decision making, provide political leadership, and determine planning applications and community representation. To discharge these roles, councillors must indeed have minimum qualifications. It might be argued that the minimum qualifications are not necessary except discriminating certain political figures, which might have accumulated so much wealth and now, hold significant political clout, but lack the minimal academic requirements.

However, the current turbulent and dynamic environment requires entrepreneurial people who are proactive and think outside the box when articulating the socio-economic aspirations of the electorate to ensure smooth and comprehensive policy formulation that enhance the running of local authorities.
The authors propose the following minimum qualifications for one to become a councillor (This means that for one to be nominated within the political party system of selecting candidates to contest elections as candidates they should satisfy the criteria set below):

- All ordinary councillors must have five ordinary level subjects including English Language;
- Chairpersons, deputy chairpersons and committee heads, in addition to the foregoing requirement, should possess tertiary qualifications (at least a diploma in whatever discipline) and a minimum of three years experience either in the public sector, private sector or just appropriate experience;
- 18 years old on the day of the election;
- Zimbabwean citizen;
- Registered voter on the day of nomination;
- For 12 months before the date of nomination, the aspiring councillor must have been the owner or tenant of any land or property within the constituency he/she wants to represent.

A councillor can be disqualified if:

- He/she is affirmed bankrupt and insolvent;
- Estate sequestrated; and
- Criminal sentence of more than three months without the option of a fine, during the previous three years.

In this article, the authors are of the view that formal academic qualifications are a necessary precondition but insufficient on their own to guarantee effectiveness and efficiency in the discharge of local authorities’ legislated mandate to the electorate. Academic qualifications are only performance indicators that guarantee manageable outcomes and outputs. It means the selected councillors can be trained or are trainable and can apprehend new skills and accumulate new knowledge without difficulty. Formal qualifications alone cannot arrest the unbridled corruption in local authorities, where inexperienced councillors are encouraged by the more experienced heads of departments and leadership in the council management to enter into unholy alliances to award tenders, and create deliberate hiccups in the implementation of council resolutions and decisions, thereby increasing the cost to ratepayers. One of the major threats to good local governance in Zimbabwe is the magnitude of corruption and the significant role that councillors play in promoting or ending it within local authorities.

While academic qualifications are a necessity, in our view this has to be viewed from Zimbabwe’s experiences with highly educated ministers and other policymakers who have collectively failed the nation. To us the system of governance is fractured in such a way that it needs a thorough reviewing to harmonise legislation, policies and systems, in order to be both relevant and responsive to the interests of Zimbabweans. It is a fact that some of the most qualified ministers in Government have become the most corrupt and incompetent; bring us to the question of values and principles within our national body polity.

In addition to formal qualifications, dedication, genuine interest and awareness in political, financial and social issues in local authorities and the country as a whole must be prerequisites for one to
become a councillor. This would now depend on the selection criteria of the political party concerned. This way, councillors will be able to comprehend the public service in terms of Government policies and priorities and, and relate it with local needs and priorities, and circumstances. This is done within the context of budget constraints and capacities. By and large, this can only be reality if councillors possess the following skills:

- Communication and presentation skills to express needs of local residents;
- Interpersonal skills;
- Commitment towards representation of the electorate;
- Decisive, quick thinker;
- Objective, analytical and critical mind;
- Strategic thinker;
- Negotiation abilities to resolve disagreements and conflicts;
- Leadership ability to chair meetings and guide deliberations, sifting collective decisions from individual opinions; and
- Effective reader

All these skills would enable councillors to understand council values, such as, council engagement, equality, quality services, accountability, communication and employer.

However, the scourge of corruption entrenched in local authorities can only be curbed through implementing recommendations made by the Nziramasanga Report of 1999. The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training Report (Nziramasanga, 1999) reaffirmed the need for the curriculum to engender a Zimbabwean culture through the philosophy of unhu/ubuntu that promotes virtues of responsibility, honesty, justice, trustworthiness, hard work, integrity, a cooperative spirit, solidarity, devotion to family and the welfare of the country. This is a public concern that the Zimbabwean youths are now rude, disrespectful of adults and generally disregard African and traditional values. Since one of the minimum qualifications proposed in this article is that every aspiring councillor must be 18 years and above, the youths must have the unhu/ubuntu inculcated in them to develop into responsible and accountable citizens.

It is the opinion of the authors in this paper that the Zimbabwean political system has let the people down. It puts mediocre but influential people into offices who are elected on political party tickets and not meritocracy. The majority of councillors cannot unpack the local government legal instruments such as the Urban Councils Act, the Regional, Town and Country Planning Act and Rural District Councils Act, leaving more room to manipulative heads of departments, who are only interested in safeguarding their jobs and huge salaries and allowances. The authors monitored the 2013 pre-budget consultative meetings by the Harare City Council in the various wards. We observed that the pre-budget meetings were disorganised, shambolic and muddled. Most of the councillors exhibited poor leadership qualities at the meetings and appeared to be in shock at the issues raised by residents, yet if they are representing the electorate they should have been able to echo the issues in committee and full council meetings. Councillors could not articulate budget issues. They lack capacity to be real effective policy makers.
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