

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROMOTING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN ZIMBABWE'S URBAN LOCAL AUTHORITIES

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## ABSTRACT

Social media is now widely used across the globe having the potential to enhance citizen participation in governance processes. Such platforms include Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp amongst others, to be interrogated in this study. The study sought to examine how these social media platforms can be used to enhance citizen participation in Zimbabwe's urban local authorities using Bulawayo and Harare City Councils as case studies. The two local authorities have a huge footprint on social media. Theoretically, the study was informed by Arnstein's ladder of participation to explore the use of social media in enhancing citizen participation. The researchers purposively and conveniently selected participants that included the residents, councillors and management. The researchers also reviewed and synthesised comments made on different social media accounts of the two cases. Data were analysed thematically where themes were established to deduce meaning guided by the research questions. Findings show that social media presents a huge potential if embraced to enhance citizen participation for it has a wider audience and also its ability to include young, people which is the larger population, using social media. Challenges associated with the use of social media were also established including the high cost of data in Zimbabwe. Also, these platforms do not go beyond the tokenism stage of the Arnstein ladder of Participation making them less effective. Lastly, recommendations are given on how to strengthen the use of social media in promoting citizen participation.

**Keywords:** Citizen participation, social media, governance, local authorities

## **INTRODUCTION**

With the world becoming a global village, the use of social media has become dominant in governance matters and as such, cannot be ignored. Urban local authorities are now visible on most social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom and Twitter amongst others. Social media has the potential to influence active stakeholder engagement in citizen participation. Across the globe, there has been an evolution in the use of technology through social media platforms in governance issues. Technology has transformed over the past years, its potential to influence stakeholder engagement cannot be ignored and the local authorities are no exception. According to Goldflank (2012), citizen engagement is a model for direct democracy engagement where citizens are offered an opportunity to learn about government operations and to deliberate, debate, and influence the allocation of public resources. It is from this background that this paper seeks to establish how the use of social media can assist in promoting citizen engagement in urban local authorities against the background of reducing levels of citizen participation in government operations, and deliberations, debate, and influence the allocation and use of public resources. The research uses Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation lenses to explore the use of social media in enhancing citizen participation, with Bulawayo and Harare City Council being the case studies.

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Scholars across the globe are of the view that the use of social media platforms can become a powerful influence in the field of economic, social and political development and good governance. The existence and autonomy of social media use in our everyday lives are capable of changing the participation of citizens in governance matters around the world. It is estimated that across the globe, there are 4.62 billion users of social media platforms (Kepios, 2022). Digital and social media platforms are capable of shaping myriad forms of political power, freedom development, and social change in both developed and developing countries.

According to Hellstrom (2010), technology determinism mainly focuses on how society's technology can influence human interaction, by shaping how a group of people think, feel and act in governance matters thereby driving the development of its social structure and cultural values. Amichai-Hamburger (2010) argues that social media and online platforms today, offer several benefits for fostering collective action over its 'offline' variants all over the world. This includes the fact that it is much easier to discover and attract members with shared interests, integrate individual contributions, make group decisions on a larger scale, exchange information, supervise a group with less need for hierarchy and manage group logistics due to the elimination of time and space constraints. Such can enable sub-national governments to eradicate challenges faced in mobilising stakeholders in citizen engagement. According to Hellstrom (2010), the effective use of social

media depends on the enabling environment of a country, that is, the political (rules and regulations), economic (affordability and easy access) as well as social (the perception of citizens).

On the African continent, countries such as South Africa and Kenya have embraced the use of social media in promoting public participation in governance issues. The devolved governments of Kenya are empowered by legal frameworks such as Acts of Parliament and the Constitution to promote the use of social media platforms in promoting citizen engagement. In South Africa, the platforms are being used for information provision (operations and events announcements), input seeking (citizen information and fundraising) and online dialogue or offline interactions. There has also been a steady increase in the number of followers on social media accounts of the provincial and municipal governments in South Africa. Vigil (2014) indicates that 17 provincial and municipal governments in South Africa have social media accounts with Facebook, Twitter and YouTube being the most commonly used social media platforms for stakeholder engagement.

However, Wampler (2015) notes that Kenya has technology, which is similar to that of developed countries, but they are yet to incorporate geographic information systems in promoting citizen participation through social media due to the huge gap of technological divide. Dlamini (2019) notes that in South Africa, social media accounts are sometimes inactive and abandoned, showing clearly that social media platforms are insufficient in promoting citizen engagement. Okeke-Uzodike and Dlamini (2019) note that the municipalities of Gauteng and Kwazulu-Natal prefer to use traditional participation methods compared to social media platforms showing that the two municipalities are conservative and resistant to change. This explains why there is slow uptake in the adoption and use of social media platforms in promoting citizen engagement.

Zimbabwe's local authorities have incorporated social media in governance matters. The Zimbabwe Digital Report (2021) reveals that more than 5 million Zimbabweans have access to the internet and 1.3 million have access to social media platforms. The most dominant social media platforms used by people in the country are WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. Almost every household, particularly in the urban local authorities, has access to social media platforms hence it can trigger active citizens' engagement in governance. Local authorities need to devise mechanisms to incorporate social media into their governance processes. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen the use and adoption of social media becoming unavoidable in governance matters. The COVID-19 regulations prevented or limited the gathering of many people thus, participatory budget meetings and consultations had to be done virtually using social media platforms. These platforms accommodate many stakeholders. However, the situation in Zimbabwe in terms of social media adoption and use in promoting citizen engagement is faced with some challenges such as poor network connectivity.

Arshad and Khurram (2020) state that many governments have taken up social media in governance matters because social media has the potential to increase engagement between governments and citizens around the world. The adoption and use of social media platforms are mainly due to an enabling environment; that is, freedom of press or media, absence of red tape, affordability of data, and proper ICT infrastructure in developed countries. This has made it easier to use social media in engagement processes, as there is also an availability of skilled personnel to implement and monitor the use of social media platforms in citizen engagement.

However, despite the notable benefits depicted in developed countries on the use of social media in promoting citizen engagement, Jones (2012) argues that governments and sub-national governments, civic groups as well as citizens in developing countries are reluctant to use social media platforms to engage citizens. Acheampong (2014) found out that there was largely an underutilisation of social media by local authorities to directly engage with existing and prospective stakeholders. The failure of local authorities to incorporate social media in citizen engagement has devastating effects on the participation of stakeholders in an era where digitalisation is the order of the day. Thus, this can result in stakeholders and citizens taking on spectators' role in engagement processes. This research therefore seeks to examine the effectiveness of social media adoption and use in promoting citizen engagement in local authorities. The paper also seeks to assess the apathy of urban local authorities on the challenges and opportunities associated with the adoption and use of social media.

## **Origins of Social Media**

The invention of the telephone, radio, and pneumatic post occurred in the final decade of the nineteenth century (Rose, 2011). Schneider (2016) notes that although the present versions are more advanced than their predecessors, telephone lines and radio waves let individuals connect across distances instantly, something that mankind had never experienced before. The 20th century saw the start of technological transformation. According to Taylor (2013), after the first supercomputers were built in the 1940s, scientists and engineers started to figure out how to connect such computers into networks, which eventually gave rise to the Internet. In the 1960s, the first versions of the Internet, including CompuServe, were created. During this time, early versions of email were also created.

By the 1970s, networking technology had advanced, and in 1979 UseNet allowed users to connect via an electronic newsletter (Klang, 2011:12). Klang (2011:12) notes that social media had advanced and personal computers were becoming more prevalent by the 1980s. Internet relay conversations became widely utilised in the 1990s after being introduced in 1988. Klang (2011) additionally asserts that Six Degrees, the first well-known social media platform, was established in 1997. Users had the option to add their profiles and friends. The first blogging platforms rose to prominence in 1999, sparking a social media phenomenon that endures

today. Taylor (2013) notes that social media saw an explosive rise in popularity following the development of blogging. In the early 2000s, websites like Myspace and LinkedIn became well-known, and Photobucket and Flickr made it easier to share photos online. Since the launch of YouTube in 2005, individuals have been able to share and interact across huge distances in a completely new way. By 2006, individuals from all across the world could access Facebook and Twitter. These websites continue to be among the most widely used social networks online. As a result, new websites like Tumblr, Spotify, Foursquare, and Pinterest started to appear to cover particular social networking voids.

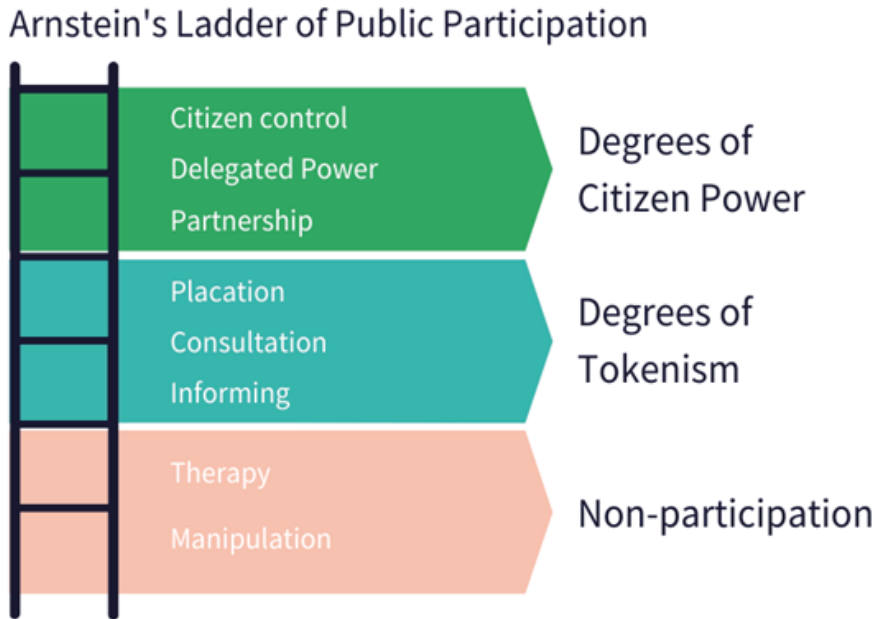
Human interactions have been completely transformed by global technological innovation. Media scholars agree that social media has the potential to have a significant impact on governance (Schneider, 2016:11). Websites and programmes that are created to enable users to share content rapidly, effectively, and in real time are referred to as social media. Social media are electronic communication platforms where users can create online communities to share information, opinions, personal messages, and other content. According to Khare (2014), social media are tools for bringing together members of diverse online communities through the use of widely accessible mobile electronic devices. Arshad and Khurram (2020: 2) argues that a platform needs to meet seven criteria to be classified as a social media website: web space, a website address, the ability to create profiles, connect with friends, upload content in real-time, support for conversations, and the ability to date and time stamp posts.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation**

Sherry Arnstein in 1969 proposed the Ladder of Citizen Participation, which is one of the most influential and widely referenced model in the field of democratic public participation. The model describes how empowered public institutions can at times, deny power to citizens, and how levels of agency, control and power can be increased. Arnstein (1969) defines citizen participation as 'the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future.' Arnstein developed a ladder of citizen participation including three ranks of citizen participation, which are further divided into eight levels of empowerment. At the bottom of the ladder are levels of non-participation including manipulation and therapy. At the middle of the ladder are different degrees of tokenism. These include informing and consultation (e.g., neighbourhood meetings), in which citizens have a voice but no guarantee for the real effects on planning outcomes. The highest rank of tokenism is placation, in which citizens are allowed to advise but the power holders are still in charge of decision-making. At the top of the ladder are levels of citizen power. Partnerships allow citizens to negotiate with the government, while delegated power and citizen

control entitle citizens to make major decisions or have full managerial power. It is only at the highest levels of this ladder that citizens share any power, from a state of 'partnership' up to the highest level, 'citizen control.' Figure 1 displays Arnstein's Ladder.



*Source: Journal of the American Planning Association*

Arnstein's ladder has been widely used to understand citizen power in local governance and there have been considerable debates on citizen participation in recent years. However, scholars argue that in practice the government often controls or leads the participatory process, thereby limiting citizen power, motivation, and contribution (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). Nonetheless, the ladder of participation is significant in understanding how social media as a medium of communication can be utilised by citizens to enhance their involvement in local government affairs such as budgeting.

As Arnstein rightly puts it, 'participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless' (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011:112). Therefore, in this instance, citizens can scale-up the ladder and instead of merely being informed and consulted in this case through social media, they can move to having control by determining how information is shared and that is through receiving some information via platforms such as emails and comments sections on platforms such as Facebook live or Twitter spaces, how resources are being utilised and exposing the numerous local government discrepancies or inefficiencies through various social media platforms. Citizens get to acquire control through social media as it allows real time information dissemination and online dialogue,



in which citizens communicate with the local authority officials (Mapuva and Mapuva-Muyengwa, 2015). In this way, citizens become active participants in governance issues and do not have to wait to be informed or consulted through traditional means of participation which requires their physical presence.

However, it should be noted that Arnstein's ladder of participation can only explain so much about the current dynamics of citizen participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Citizen control appears at the apex of the ladder, and it offers some advantages as a model of citizen participation as it may resultantly be costly and less efficient. As such, the utilisation of social media to enhance citizen participation could lead to the creation of new digital divides and social exclusion for certain groups in society.

### **Types of Social Media Platforms**

**Facebook:** It hosts over two billion monthly users, or roughly a third of the world's population, giving everyone access to the network and the chance to communicate with anyone who uses it (Ruby, 2022:21). Facebook is a platform where discussions and useful exchanges can take place across geographical boundaries. With that, it is a platform that can be used by local governments in processes such as budgeting and consultations. This resonates with the Tokenism level on Arnstein's ladder of participation. The level consists of consultation, placation and informing. Facebook as a social media platform that can be used to enhance participation has made it possible to have the three. The platform makes provision for citizens to make comments on live broadcast meetings and other updates. The possibility is a result of many people owning smartphones and watching engagement meetings via Facebook.

However, though Facebook allows for citizens to be heard, there is no follow through, hence, no assurance of changing the status quo. According to Arnstein, under these conditions, citizens lack the power to ensure that their views are heeded by the powerful. Such platforms present bigger opportunities to governments and their sub-structures to use such platforms to their advantage and also benefit the greater population, although this also comes with its limitations. New York Times (2012:5) argues that such limitations include low participation on platforms such as Facebook Live, which is a live streaming platform. Also, the platform is prone to misuse by users with some of them posting non-related issues.

**WhatsApp:** It is estimated that there are over two billion WhatsApp users across the globe (Ruby, 2022:21). At its beginning, the platform was used for communication with friends, it being an instant messaging platform. Shukla (2018:1) claims that as time went on, people began using WhatsApp to advertise and interact with clients for their enterprises. The platform has been mostly used for informing and consulting the public, which are stages three and four (tokenism) of Arnstein's ladder of participation. The platform has been widely used to inform citizens and share information amongst citizens and governments. WhatsApp is used to manipulate

citizens, for it is widely used across the globe, the reason being affordability and user-friendliness. Arnstein (1969) notes that those in power influence the public to gain their support and legitimise their decisions through propaganda means.

WhatsApp as a platform, has also been used widely to influence the public with fake news and incorrect information. Of late, the social media platform has been embraced and is now used in business, with some companies and organisations using it to do business and carry out money transactions such as WhatsApp banking. This presents a greater opportunity for local governments to embrace it to their advantage the same way banks and other businesses have done. With the way technology is evolving and the rate at which the platform is developing, projections are that it will be capable of holding virtual conferences and accommodate large numbers as compared to the current scenario where the maximum number of participants is 10 (Shukla, 2018).

**Twitter:** Stones and Williams (2007) defined Twitter (rebranded to X) as an online microblogging service that distributes short messages of no more than 280 characters called 'tweets' and that is influential in shaping politics and culture in the early 21st century. Odhiambo (2012) notes that with Twitter, one is always up to date with current information and breaking news. Twitter has transformed breaking news and users' unmatched opportunity to engage with both mainstream and specialised influences. It is one of the most widely used social networking networks, with 206 million daily active users. According to Khare (2014) it is one of the platforms widely used by governments across the globe with most of these government accounts having been verified. Twitter as a platform for communication has enabled engagement in trade-offs with public officials and power holders. A review of the platform shows the existence of Twitter pages for governments and leaders. This has enabled negotiations and engagements in trade-offs with traditional power holders. Maina (2018:113) is of the view that Twitter is used to answer questions, release the latest news, and at the same time use for targeted adverts for specific audiences. However, the platform can also be vulnerable to manipulation which is the first rung on the ladder of participation. Those in power have used Twitter to influence the public to gain support and legitimise decisions through propaganda.

### **Legislative Framework Guiding the Use of Social Media in Zimbabwe**

According to Maina (2018:27) the regulatory framework is a guideline that safeguards interests, upholds privacy and confidentiality and guides operations, users, and plans. The rules help to ensure that users behave ethically in their professional contacts and online communications. In Zimbabwe, the Postal and Telecommunications Act [Chapter 12:05] of 2000, the Official Secrets Act [Chapter 11:09] of 2001, the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act [Chapter 10:27] of 2002, the Criminal Law [Codification and Reform] Act [Chapter 9:23] of 2004, and the Interception of Communications Act [Chapter 11:20] of 2007



all provide guidelines for using social media. The nation does not have a stand-alone national social media policy. The creation of a social media policy by the government can aid in ensuring that social media is an asset rather than a liability for the organisation. A social media policy will ensure that the nation combats, among other things, terrorism, cyberbullying, and fake news. As the research was being carried out, a cyber-security bill aimed at regulating social media was in parliament.

### **Social Media in Local Government**

Many variables influence local governments to accept and use social media in the 21st century; these elements can be explored from the perspectives of the social, economic, administrative, and political contexts. Government and its agencies can effectively use social media in their external communications and public relations (Lee, 2012:132). Social media should be used by local governments because it is the new mode of communication that now predominates in people's daily lives. Local governments can reach citizens directly and disclose a large amount of information more quickly and effectively than they could using traditional methods. Communication helps governments to carry out their missions and be accountable to citizens, and social media encourages two-way communication.

World Bank (2021) highlights that with the increase in the use of the internet, more time is now spent on social media. This presents an opportunity for local governments to capitalise on it and use it as a communication tool with the stakeholders. Warren *et al.*, (2014) argue that online interactions between sub-national governments and citizens have led to an increase in interactive participation and civic engagement in issues of local affairs as compared to the traditional physical models.

Belle (2015) notes that social media has the potential to advance democracy, encourage citizen involvement, enhance political understanding processes as well as increase access to government services. Warren *et al.*, (2014) are of the view that the use of social media for citizen engagement exhibits a favourable inclination to accountability and transparency. The use of social media for civic engagement fosters confidence between the citizens and their local government, which encourages participation in citizen consultations, and updates on projects.

### **Social Media and Citizen Participation in Local Authorities**

According to Maina (2018:14) social media is increasingly replacing public institutions' conventional, one-way communication channels. Bakir and McStay (2017:7) notes since social media can give enough information to a larger audience within the community, it can be a very efficient and successful method for promoting public understanding and engagement in governance matters, particularly in the participatory budget. Social media platforms speed up feedback and reduce reliance on traditional media and government-concentrated press coverage, both of which

can be inaccurate and costly to local governments because citizen participation is inherently costly. Social media has grown to be the most prevalent form of communication that encourages contact and engagement between local government officials and citizens. It can be used as a tool for citizen participation in budget processes. Grillos (2017) asserts that when the first participatory budgeting-making processes were introduced in the early 1990s, the information technology revolution was only getting started. The processes programme frequently employed low-tech techniques, such as using postcards to invite and remind community representatives to attend meetings.

Empirical research suggests that social media can be a useful medium for citizen engagement (Agalo *et al.*, 2018). According to Lee (2014), the use of social media in citizen engagement can enhance relationships and communication between council officials and their stakeholders as social media platforms can offer a chance to boost trust among citizens. Agalo *et al.*, (2019) asserts that the participation of citizens in governance processes should encompass critical ingredients such as bottom-up, inclusivity, effective communication and transparency. The platforms facilitate online conversation and public participation in governance issues. Citizen engagement has become a key driver of consolidating decentralisation, democratic governance as well as participation worldwide. Malcolm (2011) notes that social media networking platforms that can disseminate information globally, such as Facebook, Google +, YouTube, Myspace, LinkedIn, Instagram, and blogs, are growing in popularity. An e-participation internet platform that fosters interaction between city stakeholders has been used to pilot citizen engagement in the city. This platform allows stakeholders to participate in the governance processes by submitting proposals, comments, and assessments as well as voting for or against specific proposals online.

According to Warren *et al.*, (2014) forum moderators control the flow of stakeholder interactions and discussions transparently and responsibly. This explains why social media use is successful in promoting citizen engagement. In Cologne, Germany, during the first trial of the e-participation internet platform, more than 52,000 votes were cast and over 5,000 ideas were made, (Warren *et al.*, 2014). The portal received about 120,000 different visitors, demonstrating its success in fostering participatory budgeting. The aforementioned statistics make it clear that the social media phenomena of e-participation led to an increase in the number of citizens funding the municipal budget. It should not be overlooked, though, that the study in Cologne, Germany, only looked at e-participation internet platforms rather than social media. Social media platforms are the most effective media in terms of reach and cost, and the Public Finance Management Act of 2012, Section 125 (2), calls for active citizen participation at all stages of the county governance. Unfortunately, as the majority of empirical research shows, this has not

been effectively accomplished (Ubacht, 2020). Participatory budgeting programmes piloted in Germany at the local level contributed towards local government modernisation in the country's local cities (Malcolm, 2011:4)

In light of the discussion above, this research aims at demonstrating how social media can be an efficient tool to promote citizen engagement in Zimbabwean local authorities. In doing so, it fills a gap in the body of knowledge regarding the efficient application of social media to the promotion of participatory budgeting in Zimbabwe's urban local authorities. According to Ubacht (2020), social media are recommended as tools for e-participation reformation, thus governments everywhere are adopting them. Hence, the research aims at filling the knowledge gap in understanding the usage and adoption of social media in promoting citizen engagement in urban local authorities by examining the extent to which social media may be employed in public involvement, specifically in participatory budget.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research approach was inductive as the researcher worked from the bottom using participants' views to build broader themes on the potential of social media in promoting citizen engagement using the case of Harare and Bulawayo City Councils. Data was obtained from primary and secondary sources. The purpose of combining both data collection methods in researching the opportunities and challenges of the use of social media by local authorities was to have credibility and validity of the findings. The use of both primary and secondary sources of information was key in outdoing the weakness of the other approach. The target population purposely selected for the study was seven composed of the representatives of the residents association in Harare, and the City of Harare Department of Public Relations and randomly selected councillors.

The researcher also purposively and conveniently selected residents who follow the City of Harare social media accounts page as respondents. Interviews were used as the primary data collection sources with documentary review complimenting to create balanced arguments. The researcher also reviewed and synthesised comments made on different Harare and Bulawayo City Council's social media accounts. Data were analysed thematically where themes emerged to deduce meaning guided by the research questions. Thematic analysis was highly beneficial as it allowed for the categorisation of large amounts of data making it easier to digest.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Social Media and Citizen Engagement in Zimbabwe Local Authorities**

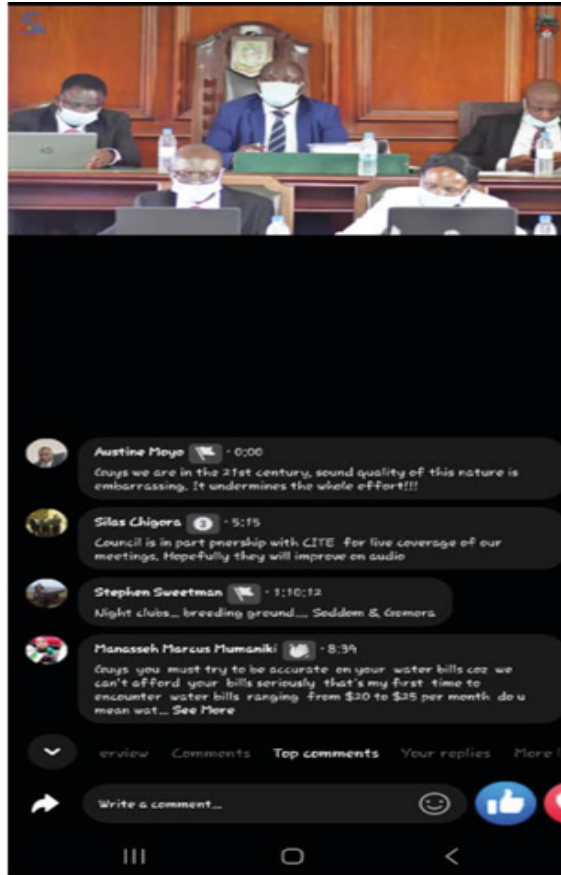
**Enhance accountability and transparency:** Social media can be used to inform the public on different issues of governance. Bowers (2014) notes social media is the foundation of an open government, which encourages accountability and openness. Bovens (2007) understands accountability as a relationship between an actor and

a forum, in which the actor must explain and justify his or her conduct. With that, social media platforms guarantee that information on the budget, programmes, and projects is periodically updated, fostering transparency and accountability. The practice of sharing council business online, demonstrates the council's accountability to its citizens, reducing corruption. Local authorities such as Harare and Bulawayo are more visible on social media as the researchers established they broadcast their council meetings on their Facebook pages to promote transparency and accountability. Kanyane *et al.*, (2020) notes that accountability is one of the pillars of good governance, allowing citizens to have a controlling stake in managing the council resources. The researchers also established that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the WhatsApp platform was used in budget formulation by Harare City Council, with each councillor having a WhatsApp group.

Residents' inputs were captured using the platform for it is the citizen who should be in control. Budget consultation meetings were done physically before the pandemic, but with the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, alternative mechanisms had to be devised and as such, resort to platforms such as WhatsApp. Citizen control, which is the eighth stage on the Arnstein ladder of participation consists of the wholesome involvement of citizens in the policy decision-making processes such as budget-making where citizens become equal partners in making decisions and directly influence implementation (Mapuva and Mapuva-Muyengwa, 2015). They further state that accountability is a remedy for corruption and promotes servant leadership, public trust, efficiency and responsiveness. For accountability to be effective, a bottom-up process that gives power to citizens and civic organisations to check the activities of service providers should be prioritised.

**Increased level of public participation and knowledge:** As more people use social media platforms in their everyday lives, local governments can boost stakeholder engagement and public awareness of the budget and council business by using social media as a route for communication. Social media platforms have improved citizen engagement because they provide the public a chance to voice their opinions and perspectives, fostering a sense of community with the council. The researchers established that these online platforms such as Facebook Live for Harare and Bulawayo City Councils have provided a platform for the residents to air out their views and concerns in the comments sections in real time as evidenced in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Live Broadcast of City of Bulawayo Full Council Meeting on Facebook on the 6 June 2021**



Social media encourages community members to be included without discrimination for the platforms know no boundaries giving every resident to participate as long as one has internet access and an electronic device. The platforms enable individuals of every gender, race, ethnicity, and colour to connect, engage, and voice their needs to the council, enabling the council to be inclusive through sound partnerships. In terms of the Ladder of Citizen Participation, the sixth stage of partnership is where the public officials and citizens agree to share planning and decision-making responsibilities through such structures as joint boards, planning committees and mechanisms of resolving impasses. However, due to several reasons such as high data costs, and poor internet connectivity, the disadvantaged groups cannot be part of these social media platforms, making them non-inclusive.

**Quick feedback:** Social media platforms encourage immediate information sharing between the council and residents. According to Vigil (2013), one of the causes of citizens' disinterest in the budget process is a need for more interaction





be composed of the residents and councillors. It is important to note that these groupings have no legitimate function or power, which means that they cannot influence any decision-making outcome.

**Cuts cost in citizen participation:** Social media platforms allow the council to cut costs in citizen engagement, in terms of resources needed for particular meetings such as transport costs, food and allowances of employees of the council. The council business can be posted via social media platforms and the residents can easily access the information in the comfort of their homes. The researchers established that with the emergence of the COVID pandemic, local authorities such as Harare City Council resorted to the use of Wards WhatsApp groups to communicate and share information such as budget consultations, refuse collection schedules, and water rationing amongst others as evidenced in Figure 3.

**Increased Awareness and Access to Information:** The researchers established that social media platforms provide citizens with access to a wide range of information about local authorities and the services they offer. This increased access to information enables citizens to be better informed and more engaged in decision-making processes. Social media provides an effective and low-cost means for urban local authorities to communicate with citizens and to respond to their concerns and questions. This improved communication can lead to greater transparency and accountability in the decision-making process. Social media platforms have the potential to reach a wider and more diverse audience than traditional forms of communication. This can help to promote the inclusion of marginalised and under-represented groups in the decision-making process.

Overall, social media can play a significant role in informing citizens in Zimbabwe's urban local authorities. Arnstein (1969), in described the third rung of informing on the Ladder, as entailing the flow of information from public bureaucrats to the citizens 'with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation'. The researchers established that the reviewed local authorities use their social media platforms to communicate with stakeholders' news, pamphlets, posters, responses to inquiries and meetings.

### **Challenges in the use of social media to promote citizen participation**

**Fake News:** Bakir and McStay (2017) are of the view that social media platforms have played a significant role in the dissemination of false information to incite fear and panic among the public. Walsh (2020) defined fake news as information that is frequently disseminated online that is either completely untrue or contains intentionally deceptive aspects. The researchers established that false and fake news have had a negative impact leading to residents having less to no confidence in local authorities. Social media outlets that spread false information may also have an impact by enhancing apathy among citizens resulting in less buy-in of the citizens in local government programmes.

**Resistance and Ignorance:** Resistance is one of the elements that might influence how social media is used by local governments, particularly in participatory budgeting. Lack of technical expertise, job loss anxiety, fear of the unknown, and distrust are a few reasons why people may resist. Pheko (2019) argues that despite several initiatives to promote the usage of social media platforms, trust difficulties persist as residents do not have confidence in local authorities. To avoid appearing to sympathise with the council's failure to deliver services, citizens do not participate in any council-related discussions because of the loss of confidence in public sector organisations.

**Division and Hostility:** Social media should encourage interaction and solidarity in the engagement process, but social media platforms can also be used to encourage antagonism. Bradshaw and Howard (2017) argue that social media favours content likely to arouse strong emotion and indignation, making it a catalyst for antagonism and division in their study on social media and moral panic. The emotional resonance of such content spreads to other users, affecting their subsequent interactions and intensifying resentment in online spaces. The researchers established that some of these platforms turn out to be political battlefields with accusations and counter-accusations diverting from the core purpose of being a platform to enhance public participation in political meetings. Ubacht (2020:73) argues that posts on social media can instigate hatred or violence, which makes it difficult to encourage the public to participate in the budgeting process since interested parties may become disinterested and disrupt the budgeting consultation meetings.

**Data Costs:** The cost of accessing the internet remains prohibitive, with Southern African countries among the most expensive on the continent according to data that has been released. According to MISA Zimbabwe (2022), the average price of 1GB of data in Zimbabwe is \$4.92, with the cheapest plan being \$1.73 and the most expensive being \$12.92. One of the respondents highlighted that the high cost of data makes it impossible to use social media platforms. Data bundles are the least to think of for there will be other pressing key priorities. As a result, citizens have limited access to information and limited participation through the use of social media due to the cost of data. The majority of individuals in Zimbabwe have access to the internet, according to prior research, but most are unable to buy data bundles (Jemwa, 2014).

**Internet Coverage:** Network coverage describes the physical areas reached by a mobile network operator's radio signal. In the quest to use social media as a tool to promote citizen participation, there will be a need for wider network coverage. However, that is not the case for most African countries due to several reasons amongst them are limited resources. One of the respondents in Bulawayo noted that due to the increase in load shedding, network connectivity has become a huge challenge stating that they are even going for eighteen hours without electricity.

Crispin *et al.*, (2013) also states that the network challenges can also be attributed to frequent power cuts and load shedding, especially in Africa. Therefore, this becomes a stumbling block to conducting virtual meetings on the budget due to poor internet access or due to poor internet speed.

**Exposure to Profane Content on Social Media Platforms:** Social media sites have the potential to expose users to offensive material unrelated to governance issues. Crispin *et al.*, (2013) found that rogue members of the public would purposefully post pornographic material on the websites and pages of public sector organisations. Respondents to this research in Harare noted that some Facebook users ended up having friends who tagged them on pornographic posts. All these have great potential to discourage citizens from engaging in governance issues via social media sites.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the available research and analysis, it can be concluded that social media plays an important role in promoting citizen participation in Zimbabwe's urban local authorities. As the world is becoming a global village, the use of social media has become dominant in governance matters. Urban local authorities are now visible on most social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom and X amongst others. The paper established that social media has the potential to enhance citizen participation. Across the globe, there has been an evolution in the use of technology through social media platforms in governance issues. Technology has advanced over the years, such that its potential to influence stakeholder engagement cannot be ignored and the local authorities are no exception. This paper established that the use of social media can assist in promoting citizen participation in urban local authorities against the background of reducing levels of citizen participation in government operations and deliberations, debate, and influence the allocation and use of public resources. Social media platforms are a solution to stakeholder apathy in the governance processes due to a need for more information from stakeholders. Thus, these platforms can trigger the participation of citizens and other stakeholders. The research established that social media platforms are faster, easier and more convenient as stakeholders can participate in the budget proceedings even in the comfort of their homes. Social media platforms have become handy when it comes to complementing and supplementing the traditional face-to-face council activities and easy access to the council stakeholders' missing engagement proceedings or any other council business virtually conducted. However, the use of social media platforms in promoting citizen participation in local authorities has been faced with various challenges, which need to be resolved so that social media platforms can reach their full potential of active participation of stakeholders in council business. More effort needs to be put in to mitigate the initial challenges of using social media platform and also crafting policies that should guide the use of social media to run council activities.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the conclusion that social media plays an important role in promoting citizen participation in Zimbabwe's urban local authorities, the following are some major recommendations for urban local authorities to effectively leverage social media for this purpose:

- (i) **Develop a social media strategy:** Urban local authorities should develop a comprehensive social media strategy that outlines the objectives, tactics, and metrics for their social media presence. This strategy should align with overall goals for citizen engagement and participation.
- (ii) **Increase presence on social media platforms:** Urban local authorities should have a strong and active presence on the most widely used social media platforms in their communities. This will help to reach a wider audience and ensure that information and updates are easily accessible.
- (iii) **Local authorities and their stakeholders need to establish a policy,** which guides the use and adoption of social media platforms and this can go a long way in eradicating challenges stakeholders face when using social media platforms.
- (iv) **The policies should capture the dos and don'ts,** which must be explained to the officials and stakeholders of the council.
- (v) **Foster two-way communication:** Urban local authorities should use social media to facilitate two-way communication with citizens. This can be done through regular updates, responding to questions and comments, and hosting online discussions and forums.
- (vi) **There is a need for the councils to provide adequate continuous training for council officials since the functional features of the version of the social media platforms keep changing.**
- (vii) **Local authorities need to invest more in ICT infrastructure at the workplace, as the infrastructure is poor hence, there is more that needs to be done in ICT infrastructure.**
- (viii) **There is a need for the councils to intensify the awareness of social media platforms to achieve active participation of stakeholders in council affairs.**
- (ix) **There is a need for councils to partner with internet service providers in increasing broadband accessibility at the same time, enabling the providers to gain something in return.**
- (x) **Engage with citizens in real-time:** Social media provides a platform for urban local authorities to engage with citizens in real-time. This can be especially important in crises where timely information and updates can help to mitigate the impact of a crisis.
- (xi) **Measure impact:** Urban local authorities should regularly measure the impact of their social media presence, including metrics such as reach, engagement,

and feedback from citizens. This will help to determine the effectiveness of their social media strategy and identify areas for improvement.

- (xii) Foster collaboration with other stakeholders: Urban local authorities should collaborate with other stakeholders, including citizens, local organisations, and media outlets, to promote citizen participation and engagement through social media.
- (xiii) These recommendations can help urban local authorities in Zimbabwe to effectively leverage social media to promote citizen participation and engagement in their decision-making processes.

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