

Research

Exploring the impact of locking down citizen's voice on citizen participation in local government budgeting during COVID-19 public restrictions in Zimbabwe

Arthur Fidelis Chikerema¹ · Vincent Chakunda¹ · Tinashe Mukunyadze¹

Received: 17 June 2024 / Accepted: 10 September 2024

Published online: 22 November 2024

© The Author(s) 2024 [OPEN](#)

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unmatched challenges for citizen participation worldwide in local government budgeting processes. Zimbabwe in particular was grappling with the pandemic's effects and pre-existing governance issues. The pandemic ignited the central government to put COVID-19 public restrictions militating on citizen engagement in the budgeting process. The implemented measures were aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. While these measures were necessary for public health, they unintentionally constrained citizens' ability to be unreservedly involved in local government decision-making. The paper employed a qualitative case study research design, employing interviews, Google Forms, and document analysis, to gather data exploring the experiences and perspectives of citizens, civil society organizations, and local government officials regarding the repercussions of constrained citizen participation in local government budgeting during the pandemic. The argument was hinged on the participatory theory based on two broad views: the normative and the instrumentalist perspectives. The paper notes that COVID-19 restrictions severely constrained citizen participation, limiting public input, deliberation, and accountability opportunities. The inability to convene public meetings, consultations, and workshops weakened the citizen-government engagement process, hindering transparency and the ability of citizens to influence resource allocation and stewardship. Furthermore, the restricted participation by marginalized communities exacerbates existing inequalities due to the technological divide hindering their ability to voice their concerns and interests in the budgeting processes. The paper calls for the exigent need for inventive methodologies to guarantee comprehensive and evocative citizen participation, by leveraging digital technologies and promoting alternative channels for engagement to augment citizen participation in local government budgeting.

Keywords Participatory budgeting · COVID-19 restrictions · Citizens' participation · Digital governance

1 Introduction

Health pandemics and/or natural disasters normally disrupt societies worldwide, fundamentally altering the dynamics of public engagement and governance practices. The paper notes that citizen participation in local government budgeting is a crucial element of democratic governance that ensures transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in resource allocation, allowing citizens to have a say in shaping community development priorities. The COVID-19

✉ Arthur Fidelis Chikerema, chikeremaaf@staff.msu.ac.zw; Vincent Chakunda, chakundav@staff.msu.ac.zw; Tinashe Mukunyadze, mukunyadzeth@staff.msu.ac.zw | ¹Department of Governance and Public Management, Faculty of Social Sciences, Midlands State University, P Bag 9055, Gweru, Zimbabwe.



epidemic prompted governments the world over to implement some health measures to deal with public health emergencies. While it was essential for curbing the increase in coronavirus cases, the measures involuntarily curtailed citizens' ability to engage liberally in local government budgeting processes.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges for participatory governance in countries around the world, both developed and developing. Governments at various levels struggled to cope with the institutional shortcomings of representative decision-making frameworks during this crisis [1]. Empirical research indicates that policymakers often seek to circumvent ordinary citizens' involvement in decision-making processes by exploiting legislative, administrative, and technical loopholes when faced with emergencies [2]. Public health crises and natural disasters generally do not foster environments conducive to participatory governance. The pandemic-related lockdowns and social distancing requirements imposed restrictions that curtailed the ability of citizens to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes [3].

It can be further noted that the pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to governance structures worldwide, including local government decision-making processes. The pandemic curtailed an inclusive and participatory budgeting process. While speaking from Brussels on the 8th of July 2020, the Chancellor of Germany said, "... The Covid-19 must not be used as an excuse to do away with the democratic values." In many African nations, the public health measures introduced in response to COVID-19 were criticised for undermining citizens' democratic rights to participate in local decision-making processes. Political actors were lambasted for using the crisis as a pretext to erode citizens' ability to hold officials accountable for their actions or inaction [4]. Under the guise of emergency measures, those in power tend to make arbitrary decisions while disregarding the fundamental value of citizen participation. Politicians often seek to suspend or restrict opportunities for direct citizen involvement during crises. As a result, public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic pose a serious threat to the resilience of fragile democracies [5]. The curtailment of participatory governance during this crisis was seen by many as a cruel and unacceptable infringement on the democratic rights of African citizens.

In Zimbabwe, the restrictions significantly impacted citizen participation in local government budgeting, as traditional avenues for engagement, such as public meetings, consultations, and workshops, were severely constrained or rendered impossible. This paper therefore seeks to examine how the response to COVID-19 by the government and its subsidiary institutions locked down the citizens' voice in participating in PB. The article examines measures that public institutions could adopt to strengthen public participation during pandemic situations. The study highlighted some shortcomings of traditional participatory budgeting processes. This paper ignites discussion and analysis of alternative innovations and interventions, such as using digital platforms for citizen engagement during the pandemic crisis. It also analyses the potential threats associated with these interventions.

However, in the context of Zimbabwe, literature is still limited on how local governments managed to circumvent the restrictions and still allow citizens to participate in budget processes. This also provides the opportunity to unpack the participatory budget enablers in a crisis environment. Zimbabwe recorded its first Covid-19 in March 2020 and this was followed by several new cases that were recorded in the following months. The increasing numbers resulted in the worldwide adoption of measures such as lockdowns to combat the spread of the pandemic. For example, by August 2020 the month in which local governments in Zimbabwe started to prepare for end-of-year participatory budgeting meetings, the country had recorded 4893 cases by 12 August 2020 [6]. The continued spread of the pandemic resulted in the imposition and adoption of extraordinary measures that infringed some of the rights of the citizens guaranteed in the constitution. The extraordinary measures and Statutory Instruments adopted by the Zimbabwean government in the form of lockdowns, restricted gatherings, and restricted movements affected several citizens' rights such as Section 58 which guarantees freedom of expression; Sections 62 and 66 which guarantee the rights to access to information and freedom of movement and residence respectively [7].

THE COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns become a threat to the practice of local democracy, particularly councils (Gweru City) that largely rely more on physical meetings as engaging platforms for participatory budgeting. In Zimbabwe, the government implemented public restrictions, including lockdown measures, to mitigate the spread of the virus. These restrictions in Gweru had a significant impact on citizen participation in local government budgeting, limiting the ability of citizens to voice their concerns and influence resource allocation decisions. This study critically interrogated the effects of these restrictions on citizen participation and explored potential strategies for maintaining an inclusive and participatory budgeting process in Gweru budgetary processes. This present article will contribute to the broader understanding of citizen-state relations and participatory governance in challenging circumstances by examining the Gweru context.

2 Literature review

2.1 Theoretical framework

The study is premised on the participatory theory based on two broad views: the normative and the instrumentalist perspectives. The theory has been applied to various discourses of governance, communication, and development. The normative view is based on an assumption that participation is regarded as a basic right [8]. With regards to this paper, participation is seen as an end in itself and it is therefore believed as the right thing to do despite any other accruing benefits of the practice in the context of participatory budgeting in Zimbabwe. In reinforcing the paper's position, Racelis [9: p. 16] views participation as an essential need in development thus citizen participation becomes a key tenet in unlocking citizen's voice in participatory budgeting in Zimbabwe. The process of development is understood as a common transformation that is expected to enhance people's growth and lives and not merely supply their material needs. According to the participatory hypothesis, public participation is a democratic prerequisite that is essential in creating an egalitarian society [10]. To this end, this paper is premised on the belief that the state and its lower tiers of government must create room that allows the voice of the citizens to be heard and thrive in the wake of a pandemic like COVID-19. The constitution of Zimbabwe (Chapter 14 of the constitution from Section 264 to 279) [7] is also clear on the roles of the state and its sub-national governments in fostering public participation.

Without citizens' voice and participation in governance processes such as Participatory Budgeting, democracy is worthless, which points to the fact that public participation must be followed as a public policy goal and applied as far and wide as possible in a democratic country [11]. In the wake of this hypothesis, participation is regarded as an empowering undertaking through which the public gains information, expertise, skills, and understanding to control their own lives and future destiny. The paper posits that public participation, as a basic right, carries considerable political implications. At its core, participation is concerned with the structural relationships within society and the importance of developing people's capacities and skills to negotiate, advocate for, and access the resources and changes they require to improve their living conditions and well-being [12: p. 5]. Thus it can be noted that the right to participate is not merely an abstract concept, but rather a tangible means for citizens' voices to be heard and shape the decisions and policies that impact their lives.

On the other hand, the instrumental view does not view public participation as an "end" but rather "a means to an end", which implies an approach to achieving some goals [13]. Advocates of this perspective on participation point to many positive ends (results) of public participation in governance and development processes. This view is primarily based on the fact that involvement stimulates justice and fairness since the marginalized voices are amplified to the fore through participation [10]. Participation also amplifies the legitimacy of the public office bearers if decisions reflect the voice of the people [14]. Proponents of this perspective also state that participation improves government responsiveness [6]. Responsiveness is one of the pillars of good governance which is reflected in local government's ability to act in the best interests raised through PB. To this end, a budget must reflect the people's will and expectations. Generally, meaningful participation unlocks the voice of the people to engage with and influence the structures of power, rather than simply being passive recipients of top-down decisions. Upholding the right to participate is, therefore, a vital component of unlocking citizens' voices, and equitable, and responsive governance that serves the interests of the people [15].

2.2 An overview of local government budgeting in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, budgeting for local government is established in various pieces of legislation [16]. Circulars from the Ministry of Local Government are also endowed with detailed procedures on how the PB process should be conducted. The PB process in Zimbabwe is characterised by three compound stages namely budget formulation, budget implementation, and monitoring and evaluation guided by pieces of legislation and legal instruments. The legislation includes the Urban Councils Act Chapter 29.17 and the Rural District Councils Act Chapter 29.13. Sub-national governments also use several instruments for public consultations on budgetary issues. Some of the instruments include public notices in council offices, notices calling for objections in newspapers, government gazette, ward development committees, councillor input, and council sub-committees [16]. However, Marumahoko et al. [17] bemoan a lack of appreciation of some of the instruments amongst the citizens that affect their participation in governance processes. In Gweru, the PB process begins with a Ministerial Circular articulating the budget process and outlining the procedures and guidelines. The council further identifies and segments stakeholders to participate in the PB process.

Some key stakeholders include the business community, council departments, civil societies, and residents' associations, community-based organisations such as community radios, and the residents identified on a ward-based system [17]. Gweru City Council invites identified stakeholders to submit budget proposals based on wider consultations from the end of constituencies of identified stakeholders. This stage is followed by a first meeting called to receive submissions from various stakeholders followed by further consolidation and costing of the submissions based on the prevailing economic conditions to come up with a preliminary budget. A second stakeholders meeting is called and the council presents the preliminary budget to the public for scrutiny where issues are raised for possible alterations. The following stage involves the review of the preliminary budget by the Budget Task Force whose role is to consider concerns raised by stakeholders. The Budget Task Force presents the draft budget to a stakeholders meeting where it is further scrutinised and if there are major issues it is referred back to the task force. A proposed budget is then established and put before the full council through the Finance Committee for adoption before it is sent to the Minister of Local Government for approval.

The stages detailed above indicate the PB process practised in Gweru. However, adherence to the process during Covid-19 was a bone of contention. The present empirical analyses need to fulfil and answer some pertinent research questions on how both the council and residents managed to navigate the vestiges of the pandemic in promoting the involvement of stakeholders in local decision-making processes.

The budget formulation cycle indicates the importance of PB where citizens from different backgrounds must participate to influence budgetary decisions and influence the choice of the livelihoods they want [18, 19]. It is therefore imperative to provide an analysis of the importance of citizen participation in budgeting processes. Maulani et al. [5] posit that PB promotes accountability to the public. Today Zimbabwe is faced with rampant corruption due to abuse and misappropriation of public funds. During the COVID-19 era, citizens in Gweru suffered a double tragedy of lockdown restrictions and a lack of platforms to participate in budget formulation processes. Public participation is vital in fostering accountability because when citizens are involved in the budget processes they can question expenditure based on what they precisely know. According to Bednarska-Olejniczak and Olejniczak [1], PB in Poland is used as a consultation tool aimed at strengthening the democratic space for citizens to decide their future. Public consultation allows local governments to address empirical livelihood challenges. More so, Dias [18] states that PB is a hope for democracy. PB is regarded as the cornerstone of democracy in modern societies. This means that PB provides a platform on which the citizens can collectively express their service delivery expectations. PB provides marginalised people with the chance to freely participate in matters that affect their lives and the chance to foster recognition. PB allows citizens' voices to be heard by institutions responsible for service delivery.

Therefore, participatory budgeting is a procedure that implicates citizens in decision-making regarding the allocation of public funds as it enables citizens to make a direct contribution to how resources are prioritized and spent in their jurisdictional areas. Evidence abounds that the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions have posed challenges to the implementation of participatory budgeting in Gweru due to limited physical gatherings as PB often involves face-to-face meetings, public consultations, and community assemblies. Overall despite the noble rationale associated with the restriction, led to limited civic engagement and participation in local government processes as several households were focusing on addressing immediate livelihood concerns, diverting their attention from participating in Local decision-making processes.

2.3 Policy framework

Zimbabwe like any other nation that has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, announced its first lockdown measures in March 2020 [20]. Supplementary measures established in statutory instruments (SIs) were also imposed. However, according to Mavhinga [21], the additional measures instituted to curb the virus were harsh as they infringed on the basic human rights of the local people. The rights infringed include the freedom of gathering, freedom of association, and suspension of dutiful gatherings and other civilizing activities upon which budget issues are openly discussed by the people. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Zimbabwe enacted several legal measures to address the public health crisis. These included:

1. The Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and Urban Areas of Zimbabwe) (COVID-19) Notice, 2020 (Statutory Instrument 76 of 2020), which declared the coronavirus an infectious disease and a state of disaster.
2. The Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) Regulations, 2020 published as Statutory Instrument 77 of 2020, which classified COVID-19 as a formidable epidemic disease.

3. The (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order, 2020 contained in Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020, which imposed a 21-day national lockdown, with exceptions for essential services.

Despite these early interventions to combat the spread of COVID-19, the pandemic continued to escalate globally, leading to extended lockdowns and the closure of national borders in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. The government's legislative actions demonstrated its efforts to respond to the public health emergency, but the persistent nature of the COVID-19 outbreak necessitated further restrictive measures over time. The coronavirus pandemic affected the daily lives and normal functioning of public institutions in Zimbabwe, Gweru City Council included. Evidence indicated that the lockdown measures impacted the scheduling and gatherings of people to convene physical meetings. The pandemic distorted the living patterns of all people around the globe, influenced domestic economies, forced governments and their lower tiers to cope with waning revenues, and altered patterns of governance processes and practices [22].

2.4 Digital governance and citizen participation

During a crisis, governments need to provide accurate, useful, and up-to-date information to people. Governments should explore the comparative advantage of the fourth Industrial Revolution during pandemics, to avail information on their national portals, mobile apps or social media platforms. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have played a crucial role in supporting public health, safety, and the continued functioning of economies and societies during the COVID-19 crisis [23]. Digital government platforms, whether through information sharing or the provision of online services, have helped to maintain connectivity between governments and citizens throughout the outbreak. Additionally, digital technologies have enabled governments to make more rapid, data-driven policy decisions, enhance local authorities' coordination capabilities, and deploy evidence-based services to those most in need [23]. The Global South due to its peripheral position suffered a lot due to lack of the requisite infrastructure and the digital divide phenomenon. The present paper implores governments from the Global South especially the African continent and Gweru in particular to prioritise digital transformation policies including reinforcement of the policies and technical competence of institutions that serve the public. The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic reinforced the need and significance of technology as well as the critical function of an inclusive, efficient, and responsible government [24]. Consequently, digital governance refers to procedures, strategies, and configurations through which decisions are formulated and engagements are taken to accomplish and standardize digital technologies and data within a polity. DG involves the utilisation of digital tools, technologies, and platforms to improve governance regimes, improve service delivery, and nurture transparency, accountability, and citizen participation.

During the pandemic traditional avenues of citizen engagement were constrained, hindering continued and meaningful participation. As a result of the epidemic of the Covid-19 outbreak, different tiers of government in European countries started investing huge financial resources in the improvement and expansion of their online platforms, mainly to promote participatory platforms for the general public. Characterised by Gilman and Peixoto [25] as digital participation, the coronavirus scenario shadowed face-to-face deliberation on policy issues. Digital participation for Gweru City Council was a convenient avenue for the public with capable levels of digital literacy to partake in decision-making at the local level. The major concern for this article was the digital divide as the research unpacked the uptake of digital platforms from different jurisdictions, for instance, the Low, Middle, and high-density suburbs. People with digital illiteracy were barred from such egalitarian exercises as institution and processes of participatory decision-making were required to be remodeled in a way that reflected the new norm.

The paper notes that, due to the restriction, most local authorities, Gweru invested in digital platforms for continued, incisive, and comprehensive dialoguing through virtual meetings, webinars, online survey and feedback forms, mobile platforms, social media engagements and collaborative online workspaces. Gweru City Council leveraged technology to conduct virtual meetings and webinars using a video conferencing platform allowing citizens to participate remotely, providing opportunities for public consultations, discussions, and feedback on budgeting processes. The technology platforms were geared to gather input from citizens on budget priorities and resource allocation through GCC's official websites, social media platforms, or email newsletters, ensuring broader participation and reaching citizens who may not have been able to attend in-person meetings. The paper notes that when implementing alternative avenues of citizen engagement, efforts should be made to ensure inclusivity, accessibility, and the protection of citizens' privacy and data. Gweru City Council in the future should continue harnessing the potential of DG for effective and efficient governance, while also addressing challenges and risks associated with their use. In the end, governments need to ensure that the

benefits of the digital revolution are shared equitably. Therefore, it is the conviction of this paper that policymakers will further embrace the future of digital government, even in the aftermath of the crisis.

3 Methodology

The paper took a case study methodology and a qualitative case study research design. Kekeya [26] defines a qualitative case design as concerned with approaches such as ethnographic, grounded theory, mixed methods, and case studies it is further concerned with data gathering techniques, tools, and analysis, as well as ethical procedures and methods of ensuring research trustworthiness employed in the study [2]. A case study approach was preferred for this research as according to Ary et al. [27: p. 27], "A case study is an in-depth study of a single unit, such as one individual, one group, one organization and one program". For Bryman [28: p. 52] notes that a "case study entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case". Therefore, a case study provided in-depth data and a whole or complete picture of how the pandemic restrictions militated on government-citizens' engagement.

The paper employed qualitative strategies, interviews, Google Forms, and document review. The tools were used to gather descriptive data of the lived experiences of the participants and their direct actions associated with experiences to enhance understanding of how restrictions affected policy formulation and government-citizen interactions. For Johnson & Christensen [8: p. 388] qualitative methods are valuable because they "view human behaviour as dynamic and changing, and... advocate studying the phenomenon in depth and over an extended period".

Due to the restrictions imposed by the central government, Gweru was chosen due to its convenience and accessibility with key informants which include government departments, Gweru CITY Council, Vungu Rural Council, and other vital stakeholders for instance Gweru Residents and Ratepayers Association and Gweru Residents Forum. Interviews were employed to collect data from key informants and Google forms were sent to resident associations to give vital information that was analysed through thematic and content analysis to conclude how the Zimbabwean Central Government implemented COVID-19 restrictions affected and hindered participatory budgeting which is a major pillar of local democracy.

4 Results

4.1 Uptake of digital technologies and digital governance

Access to pre and post-budget documents and holding of budget consultation meetings, during the COVID-19 pandemic varied depending on the specific practices and regulations in place in each locality. Traditionally, the Gweru City Council used to publish public notices regarding the budget process. These notices were posted on notice boards, published in local newspapers, or shared through official communication channels. The traditional platform and orientation of the structures of the council were and are far from being configured to facilitate participatory processes. Furthermore, the bureaucratic culture, administrative structures, and human resources skills of the local bureaucrats remain ideal for top-down decision-making. For Thomas [29: p. 5] decision-making at GCC is still, in the traditional sense, vertical and is based on linear processes that were inimical to participatory budgeting, the devolution of power, and shared decision-making. Ward's presentation also still resembled a tokenistic culture meant to hoodwink unsuspecting city residents into endorsing a budget that has already been crafted to reflect rationality and narrow sectional interests in the eyes of the local bureaucracy- ELITIST.

The outbreak of the pandemic forced institutions to adopt relevant platforms that are suitable in a crisis. For Gweru City Council, the availing of digital platforms had its fair challenges. Despite, the existence of websites and online portals for the Council, that contain pre-budget documents, including draft budgets, budget proposals, and related financial information. The major concern was the uptake of these platforms by residents from the different suburbs. The uptake for DTs on governance issues (PB) differed significantly, in Low Density 80%, Medium Density 65%, and High Density: 45%. The uptake of digital technologies among households residing in low-density and high-density suburbs varied due to access to infrastructure, affordability, digital literacy, and cultural considerations. The preceding submission is testimony that, despite the progressive adoption of the digital platform in PB, other citizens' voices were muzzled and blocked as the abrupt transition was expensive and anti-poor.

4.2 Access to infrastructure

The availability and quality of digital infrastructure, including stable internet connectivity and electricity, play a crucial role in the uptake of digital technologies. The Middle and Low-Density suburbs inhabitants, despite excellent digital infrastructure and the presence of solar energy, are also able to invest in internet modems and procure unlimited data bundles. This enabled the inhabitants to engage on different council digital platforms participating in how local government decisions are formulated and implemented. According to one of the LD inhabitants:

“Digital platforms during pandemics or crises promote and consolidate citizenry activism as citizens will interface with the day-to-day operations of local authorities. The platforms enable citizens to hold council officials and councillors accountable for their actions thus promoting transparency and integrity.”

In most high-density suburbs digital infrastructure is still to be installed, and even service providers such as LIQUID /Econet’s optic fibre are still to be laid down so that inhabitants enjoy uninterrupted and free services. Therefore, for this category of inhabitants if the government does not provide the infrastructure and free Wi-Fi it will be very difficult for them to invest their resources so that they partake in governance issues. One of the HDs inhabitants argued that:

“Procuring a modem in crisis time where survival is the goal, it’s a luxury. One should buy bundles to go on Instagram and other social media platforms to relieve stress and not filter into local authorities’ platforms. Local authorities are havens of crime and corruption and nothing will change. For one to partake in governance issues maybe if the government installs Digital Technologies and offers free WI-FI one will then consider indulging in issues that concern sustainable development in Gweru.”

Consequently, it will be very difficult for the inhabitants in High-density suburbs to access pre- and post-budget documents and hold budget consultation meetings, during crises if the digital technologies are not installed. The local governments need to promote strategic investments for digitalising the areas under their jurisdiction. Digital investments are central for Zimbabwe’s central and other tiers of government to keep pace and avoid being left behind in a rapidly changing global economy [30]. This will enable the government to give voice to residents as they influence policy formulation and resource allocation through digital governance. The COVID-19 crisis underscores the importance of digital technology enabling every citizen, business, and government and ensuring universal access to services. The World Bank [30] recognizes the country’s advances as a good foundation upon which digital skills could be leveraged. The head of the World Bank Task Team Leader Kunicova implored that:

“To truly reap the digital dividends, the new digital economy in Zimbabwe needs to be inclusive to ensure that anyone—regardless of age, gender, income, or geographic location—can access digital tools and services.”

Therefore, local authorities like Gweru should unlock digital transformation for them to build a robust local digital economy expanding digital infrastructure, digital government platforms, digital skills, and digital entrepreneurship. Also of major concern is that for NDS1 to succeed and for local authorities to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals there is a need for Gweru City Council and the central Government to make regulatory improvements as well as investments in four interconnected areas across all pillars namely: policy and regulatory framework, resource management and coordination, governance, and capacity building. The paper established that affluent suburbs mostly have superior digital infrastructure compared to high-density suburbs. Consequently, the convenience of dependable internet services and the availability of dependable sources of energy impact the extent to which citizens can adopt and utilize digital technologies.

4.3 Affordability

The uptake of DTs was crucial to curb the transmission and spread of the virus. The Zimbabwe economy is 85% informal and Gweru is also following the same ratio of informality. The restriction meant curtailing and stifling movement militating on Household livelihoods and sources of income. The dwindling of household income meant that Gweru inhabitants were now seized with survival strategies and concentrating on feeding their families. The purchase of data was not a priority hence disregarding fundamental governance issues affecting their jurisdiction. One resident from HD suburb implored that:

"It is better to buy a WhatsApp bundle to chat with friends and relatives than to buy a data bundle to go on the council website or platform to view budget proposals. It is just a luxury that I cannot afford, after all, even if residents air their views, councillors and management's views will triumph over residents."

Most high-density inhabitants were worried about the way operate especially about the timeframe where they send a voluminous budget proposal that they want residents to scrutinise a few hours before the commencement of budget consultations. Due to dwindling income residents cannot afford data to download for example a 300-page document as data bundles are expensive.

In contrast, the Middle and Low-Density inhabitants were thrilled by the availing of the digital platform by the council for them to air their views and concerns on service delivery and local decision-making processes like (PB). One LD resident implored that:

"Councils need to leverage Digital platforms as they have a comparative advantage over traditional engagement platforms. Meetings and consultations can be done in the comfort of residents' homes thereby combating the spread of the virus while consolidating local democracy and citizen participation"

Most households in these suburbs have installed internet modems and seem to have the financial power to purchase data as indulging in governance issues is paramount to the development of the city and promotes the formulation of incisive policies that mirror residents. According to UNDESA [23], while an increase in internet and data usage can be celebrated as a step towards development in Gweru, the advancement exposed a massive resource constraint among thousands of medium and high-density Suburbs residents who have no access to gadgets, networks, and money to go online thus cutting them off from economic, political and social activities because they have no means to be online. The paper established that the affordability of digital devices, for instance, smartphones, computers, and internet modems can impact the uptake of digital technologies. Low-density suburbs often have higher socioeconomic status, which may lead to relatively higher purchasing power and easier access to digital devices. In contrast, individuals in high-density suburbs may face financial constraints, making it more challenging to afford and adopt digital technologies thus locking the voices of the most vulnerable and the needy groups.

4.4 Digital literacy

According to CITE [31], the novel COVID-19 pandemic has not only claimed millions of lives the world over, but it has also disrupted daily life in unprecedented ways and exacerbated inequalities in human development. Factually, the new normal means that, people have to adjust to a new way of living. Digital literacy refers to the ability to effectively use digital technologies. DL is a critical vehicle influencing the uptake of digital technologies within the different urban localities. The uptake of this platform in accessing participatory budgeting documents and information differs among the inhabitants of Gweru. Low Density literacy level is 95%, Middle Density 80%, and High Density 60%. The high literacy ratio across the jurisdiction is encouraging but the major concern is the time residents devote to governance issues. Residents from across the urban divide who are familiar with technology quickly acclimatised to the new normal by adopting and utilizing digital tools and platforms. According to CITE [31], Gweru residents who adopted digital technologies for instance installing Wi-Fi and solarising their homes managed to make do with working from home and conducting virtual ward meetings with their councillors for the development of their wards, unfortunately disregarding the voices of less privilege groups.

One of the HD Suburb Snr citizens posited that:

"Unfortunately governance engagements are not like some private formal entity meetings that can be done online. Residents in the Ghetto especially breadwinners and mostly Senior Citizens imagine the hassles of putting people in virtual space sometimes it becomes difficult unless someone has a gadget that brings them together. Some places have no network and it becomes very unfair. PB is different from a conference because people want to be hands-on."

For the UNDESA [23] despite socio-economic challenges brought by COVID-19, service providers have been hiking prices ever since the lockdown putting data and internet bundles out of reach for underprivileged residents thousands. Also of importance is the infrastructural gap making it difficult to close the digital gap and disenfranchise residents from High-density suburbs. The paper notes that, before the pandemic, global inequalities in access to the internet were already abundantly clear. Almost half of the households in Gweru still have no access to the internet [23]. The outbreak of the pandemic revealed the inadequacy of internet access in Zimbabwean Cities. In Zimbabwe, mobile internet and

data usage have gone up by about 43% since the outbreak of the pandemic as the masses and institutions were forced to migrate to online platforms to curb the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, Councils were found at a crossroads to combat the virus and promote local democracy resulting in locking the voice of the have-nots. Whilst the use of online platforms has been an innovative way to reach out to people, the vulnerable groups in urban areas were largely left out showing the obnoxious side of digital governance." It is the conviction of this paper that the uptake of digital technologies is not solely determined by the density of the suburb but by infrastructure gaps, affordability, and digital literacy.

5 Discussion

5.1 The COVID-19 pandemic and public restrictions in Zimbabwe

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread over time, it affected the governance processes such as participatory budgeting (PB) at both local and national levels. Participatory Budgeting (PB) process is important in improving the value of democracy by promoting public debate about financial allocations and unrestricted citizen participation in significant public policy issues. Despite its importance, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the introduction of lockdown measures which had unprecedented effects on the governance process of local authorities in Zimbabwe.

The COVID-19 lockdown measures introduced to control and limit the spread of the disease involved restricted and banned physical meetings, controlled activities such as the imposition of curfews, and the introduction of social distancing protocols. All this created challenges for Gweru City Council in holding public meetings which is a traditional way of conducting public hearings in Gweru. Consequently, local authorities such as the Gweru City Council have had to devise and adopt strategies to promote public participation while adhering to COVID-19 protocols. The extant literature shows that in some parts of Europe, participatory budgeting processes were adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic besides being one of the cornerstones of a democratic process through which marginalised and dormant voices are heard [22]. In particular, Olejniczak and Bednarska-Olejniczak [22] noted that in Poland the Covid-19 pandemic affected the schedules and the scope of consultations.

Although Zimbabwe received many recoveries in August 2020, the measures restricted physical movement and gathering of the citizens to partake in customary participatory budgeting processes which happens every year-end. Gweru City's governance systems were not spared from the COVID-19 restrictions. Gweru City Council adopted budgets through digital platforms without following traditional staples of physical gatherings. But the question is how many people were able to participate through digital platforms given several challenges that are faced by people in different geographical locations in Gweru. In support of the above claims, Mavhinga [21] highlighted that some of the COVID-19 restrictions were too extreme and harsh on citizens since citizens were completely shut out of participation [20].

Thus Harris [32] says that lockdown restrictions were supposed to be reasonable and balanced. This means that despite the need to contain the spread of the pandemic, the lockdown measures in any case are supposed to be proportionate to respect the fundamental rights such as the participation of citizens in preparation of budgets that affect their lives through digital platforms accessible to many. In Gweru Urban the drastic measures resulted in a lack of participation of citizens in local governance processes, particularly the physical gatherings that have been always the traditional way of conducting the PB process. The view by Harris [32] indicates the importance of respecting some of the fundamental processes that affect the lives of citizens. The pandemic affected participatory democracy which is very important in the democratisation process in Zimbabwe. The voice of the people was shut hence they could not influence any meaningful contribution to the PB process given the limited lines of influence and participation.

5.2 Impact of COVID-19 public restrictions on citizen participation in local government budgeting in Gweru

One of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is the disruption of face-to-face interactions between Gweru City Council and its stakeholders. The physical meetings were discontinued as well as re-scheduled in line with the COVID-19 protocols and regulations that have been put in place to control the spread of the disease. The lockdown restrictions did not allow citizens to freely move or gather in and out of town to access the council offices where communication about budget consultation is traditionally communicated. In reinforcing, Ndiao [33] indicates that in Kenya public gatherings were restricted in many counties, and PB processes were discontinued and rescheduled at the detriment of time and budget space of local authorities. Moreover, in Gweru, the police manned many roadblocks around town entries to limit the movement of people into the CBD and in many cases people were turned back despite looking forward to accessing the

Town House. The lockdown measures reduced opportunities for public consultations and town hall traditional physical meetings. Moreover, Councillors and administrators who usually call and gather residents to sensitise, conduct meetings, and disseminate information about PB were completely restricted from complying with imposed lockdown restrictions for fear of spreading the disease. The fact that councillors could not gather people meant that lockdown measures affected representative democracy, a key aspect of public participation.

However, in Zimbabwe, physical face-to-face meetings are the most common mechanism employed to conduct PB processes [17] which means that the lockdown restrictions interfered with such mechanisms hence a few people participated. The suspension of public gatherings also meant that few to no people participated in PB in Gweru. In agreement with this, Ndiao [9] found that in Kenya COVID-19 protocols restricted the public gatherings (*barazas*) funerals, and church forums where information about PB future gatherings is publicly shared. According to Laurian [14], one of the characteristics of the representativeness of any meeting is the cumulative number of the public who attend. This therefore means that the smaller the number of citizens in attendance, the more the likelihood that the group in attendance does not represent the diversity of the groups within the area for instance the youth, women, and people living with disability.

The movement of information was also negatively affected and disrupted due to the lack of access to smartphones and poor connectivity. Information sharing became limited due to the cost of airtime. Most of the people in high-density areas live below the poverty datum line hence their resources are channelled towards survival as compared to the people in low-density suburbs. Residents in high-density areas lambasted digital platforms as purchasing bundles to access council proceedings on Facebook and Whats App groups was more of a luxury. This is even though councils resorted to online platforms for communication of their processes [1]. All this limited accessibility to budget information amongst residents including the marginalised and persons with disabilities who survive on handouts. The epidemic forced institutions to share information about budgets through online platforms as opposed to the traditional means of hard copies. Moreover, this further meant that the disadvantaged groups were at the receiving end of a lack of information hence their voice was silenced. Existing literature acknowledges that access to timely, relevant, and comprehensive information, shared in an inclusive manner accessible to all the people in the society, is important and valuable when citizens participate in budget processes [12].

6 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic militated and inhibited citizen participation in local government budgeting processes in Gweru. Government restrictions and lockdown measures had a momentous impact on, digital governance, citizen engagement and the ability of citizens to voice local government resource allocation and stewardship. The ban on traditional processes and platforms of engagement inhibited citizens from attending public consultations, community meetings, and budget hearings, militating on citizen participation. The restrictions have reduced opportunities for robust citizenry activism. Furthermore, despite the uptake of DTs by the council, the digital divide and unequal access to digital technologies and internet connectivity exacerbate the challenges faced by citizens in engaging with local government budgeting processes, especially the vulnerable and privileged members. Individuals residing in low-density and high-density suburbs face disparities in access to infrastructure, affordability of digital devices, and digital literacy, which hinder their ability to participate effectively in online consultations or access budget-related information. The lack of transparent and accessible platforms for disseminating pre-budget documents, budget proposals, and financial information further limits citizen engagement. Moreover, partial sentiments about budget processes and the availability of pre-budget documents also contribute to the complications citizens face in keenly contributing to local government budgeting. Without meaningful citizen participation, local government budget decisions may not mirror the priorities of the residents they serve. Moreover, the privation of openness and accountability in budgeting processes may erode public conviction in local authorities and hinder effective governance. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has modelled substantial challenges to citizen participation in local government budgeting in Zimbabwe, local authorities must prioritize inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. Through espousing inventive methodologies and ensuring impartial access to participation opportunities, local governments will uphold democratic principles and ensure that citizen voices are reflected in budgetary decision-making processes.

6.1 Recommendations

- Participatory and deliberative forums need to be designed in ways that offer, side-by-side, both in-person and online avenues. This would increase the chances for ordinary people to widen and deepen their presence and voices in local policymaking and budgetary processes.
- Local governments must begin to invest in developing and enhancing online platforms in such a way that ordinary people can easily access the services they need. Investment is also required to provide digital literacy to the public.
- Accountability loopholes must be explored regularly so that decision-makers can never underestimate citizens' right to participate in decision-making processes.
- Mechanisms such as social auditing, citizen's juries, and public hearings must be organized regularly.

Acknowledgements We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the members of the research team who contributed to the successful completion of this study. Their dedication, expertise, and commitment were instrumental in the realization of our research objectives. We are thankful for their valuable insights, collaborative spirit, and unwavering support throughout the research project.

Author contributions 1. Framed the whole paper and provided the outline. 2. Conceptualisation of key issues and methodology. 3. Literature review and analysis of findings.

Funding This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, private or non-governmental organization.

Data availability The article will be found and access in social science repository, google and the journal can avail it for wider readership.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate The study was performed in accordance with the Midlands State University guidelines granted by the Research Ethic Committee University (Midlands State University Research and Ethics Committee): Confidentiality, Trustworthiness and Right to privacy.

Consent for publication The respondents who were participants to this research granted the search team consent as individuals and from their representatives. The participant voluntarily gave informed consent to participate in the study but no minors were part of the respondents who participated in the research.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

1. Bednarska-Olejniczak D, Olejniczak J. Participatory budgeting in Poland in 2013–2018—six years of experiences and directions of changes; 2018. p. 337–54.
2. Cohen L, Manion L, Morrison K. Research methods in education. 7th ed. Abingdon: Routledge; 2011.
3. Boin A, Lodge M, Luesink M. Learning from the COVID-19 crisis: an initial analysis of national responses. *Policy Des Pract.* 2020;3(3):189–204.
4. Nabatchi T, Leighninger M. Public participation for 21st century democracy. John Wiley & Sons; 2015.
5. Maulani N, Nyadera IN, Wandekha B. The generals and the war against COVID-19: the case of Zimbabwe. *J Glob Health.* 2020;10. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:226280613>
6. Innes JE, Booher DE. Collaborative policymaking: governance through dialogue. *Deliberative policy analysis: understanding governance in the network society*; 2003. p. 33–59.
7. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013)
8. Johnson B, Christensen L. Educational research: quantitative, qualitative and mixed approaches. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage; 2008.
9. Racelis M. Begging, requesting, demanding, negotiating: moving towards urban poor partnerships in governance. In: *Urban Research Symposium*, World Bank, Washington DC; 2003. p. 16–18.
10. Arnstein SR. A ladder of citizen participation. *J Am Inst Plann.* 1969;35(4):216–24.

11. Curato N, Sass J, Ercan S, Neymer S. Deliberative democracy in the age of serial crisis. *Int Polit Sci Rev.* 2020;41(4):55–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120941882>.
12. Creighton JL. The public participation. Handbook. Making better decisions. John Wiley & Sons; 2005.
13. Peng L, Yang W, Zhang D, Zhuge C, Hong L. Epidemic analysis of COVID-19 in China by dynamical modelling; 2020. arXiv preprint [arXiv: 2002.06563](https://arxiv.org/abs/2002.06563).
14. Laurian L, Shaw MM. Evaluation of public participation: the practices of certified planners. *J Plan Educ Res.* 2009;28(3):293–309.
15. Falanga R. Participatory design: participatory urban management. In: Sustainable cities and communities. Cham: Springer International Publishing; 2020. p. 449–57.
16. Urban Councils Association of Zimbabwe. Best practices in participatory budget process for five cities in Zimbabwe. Harare: Urban Councils Association Publications; 2006.
17. Marumahoko S, Chigwata TC, Nhede NT. Participatory budgeting in the City of Kwekwe (Zimbabwe): a perspective on the issues, trends, and options. *Afr J Public Affairs.* 2018;10(4):196–211.
18. Dias N. Hope for democracy 30 years of participatory budgeting worldwide. Faro: Epopeia Records & Oficina coordination & Nelson Dias; 2018.
19. Onditi F, Obimbo M M, Kinyanjui S M, Nyadera IN. Rejection of containment policy in the management of COVID-19 in Kenyan slums: is social geometry an option? 2020. <https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-40952/v1>.
20. Chirisa I, Mavhima B, Nyevera T, Chigudu A, Makocheke A, Matai J, Masunda T, Chandaengerwa EK, Machingura F, Moyo S, Chirisa H, Mhloyi M, Murwira A, Mhandara L, Katsande R, Muchena K, Manjeya E, Nyika T, Mundau L. The impact and implications of COVID-19: reflections on the Zimbabwean society. *SocSciHumanit Open.* 2021;4(1): 100183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100183>.
21. Mavhinga D. The independent, lockdown laws draconian, excessive; 2020. <https://www.theindependent.co.zw/2020/04/03/lockdown-laws-draconian-excessive/>
22. Bardovič J, Gašparík J. Enablers of participatory budgeting in Slovakia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scientific papers of the University of Pardubice, series D: faculty of economics and administration. 2021; 29(1). <https://doi.org/10.46585/sp29011248>
23. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. COVID-19: embracing digital government during the pandemic and beyond, Policy BRIEF NO 61; 2020.
24. Matlosa K. The state of democratization in Southern Africa: blocked transitions, reversals, stagnation, progress and prospects. *Politikon.* 2017;44(1):5–26.
25. Gilman HR, Peixoto TC. Digital participation. In: Handbook of democratic innovation and governance. Edward Elgar Publishing; 2019. p. 105–34.
26. Kekeya J. Qualitative case study research design: the commonalities and differences between collective, intrinsic and instrumental case. *Contemp PNG Stud.* 2021;36:28–37.
27. Ary D, Jacobs LC, Razavieh A. Introduction to research in education. 6th ed. Belmont: Wadsworth; 2002.
28. Bryman A. Social research methods. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University; 2008.
29. Thomas J, Newman M, Oliver S. Rapid evidence assessments of research to inform social policy: taking stock and moving forward. *Evid Policy.* 2013;9(1):5–27.
30. The World Bank. Digital transformation a key enabler of long-term resilient growth in Zimbabwe. The World Bank; 2021.
31. Centre for Innovation and Technology CITE. COVID-19 widens digital divide between urban and rural communities. Centre for Innovation and Technology CITE; 2021.
32. Harris LB. Jail time for breaking COVID-19 regulations; 2020. <https://www.cite.org.zw/jail-time-for-breaking-covid-19-regulations/>
33. Ndiao EO. Public participation in the budget process during the Covid-19 pandemic: an assessment of challenges and strategies employed by selected counties in Kenya. *Impact J Transf.* 2022;5(1):1–11.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.