
“GOVERNANCE, PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: EXAMINING THE STATE AND CITIZEN ROLES IN ACHIEVING THE SDGS IN ZAMBIA, AFRICA”

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the interrelationship between governance, public engagement, and sustainable development in Zambia, focusing on the roles of the state and citizens in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It assessed how governance structures, policy frameworks, institutional capacity, transparency, and accountability mechanisms influenced SDG implementation at both national and local levels, alongside the contribution of citizen participation to development outcomes. A descriptive mixed-methods research design was employed, using a sample of 400 participants selected from government institutions, local authorities, civil society organizations, and community members. The study was conducted in selected provinces of Zambia to ensure representation of diverse socio-economic and governance contexts. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews and analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that Zambia had made progress in aligning national development plans with the SDGs; however, gaps remained in policy coordination, institutional capacity, resource mobilization, and meaningful public engagement. Weak inter-sectoral coordination, duplication of efforts, and inconsistent enforcement of accountability mechanisms limited effective implementation. Although citizen participation, civic awareness, and civil society involvement were present, these remained constrained by limited access to information and weak participation structures. Decentralized governance improved

local responsiveness but was hindered by financial and technical capacity challenges. The study concluded that sustainable development in Zambia depended on strengthening democratic governance, improving transparency and accountability, enhancing institutional coordination, and promoting active citizen participation. It further established that SDG progress required not only state-led interventions but also empowered citizens actively involved in decision-making, monitoring, and accountability processes. It was therefore recommended that the Government of Zambia institutionalize a legally backed, inclusive, and well-resourced citizen engagement framework at both national and local levels to ensure systematic participation of citizens and civil society in planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring of SDG-related programmes.

KEYWORDS: *Citizen Participation, Governance, Public Engagement, State–Citizen Relations and Sustainable Development Goals.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has emerged as a dominant framework guiding global and national development agendas, particularly following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The 17 SDGs provide an integrated and universal blueprint aimed at eradicating poverty, reducing inequality, promoting environmental sustainability, and fostering inclusive economic growth by 2030 (UN, 2015; Sachs, 2012). For developing countries such as Zambia, the SDGs represent both an opportunity and a challenge, as they require aligning domestic priorities with global commitments while addressing persistent socio-economic constraints. Zambia has domesticated the SDGs within its national development strategies, integrating them into medium-term development plans and sectoral policies (GRZ, 2022; UNDP, 2020). However, translating these commitments into tangible outcomes requires effective governance systems and inclusive participatory approaches.

Governance is central to the realization of sustainable development because it determines how authority is exercised, how public resources are managed, and how decisions are implemented. Good governance is commonly associated with transparency, accountability, rule of law, responsiveness, and inclusivity (World Bank, 1992; Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010). In Zambia, governance structures at national and local levels significantly influence the coordination and implementation of SDG-related policies. Weak institutional capacity, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies can undermine development outcomes and limit progress toward sustainability targets (Leftwich, 1993; Andrews, 2013).

Strengthening governance institutions is therefore fundamental to ensuring that development programs are effectively delivered and equitably distributed.

Citizen participation is widely regarded as a cornerstone of democratic governance and sustainable development. It encompasses the active involvement of individuals and communities in decision-making processes that affect their lives (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006). In Zambia, citizen participation occurs through electoral processes, decentralization initiatives, community meetings, and civil society engagement platforms. Meaningful participation enhances policy legitimacy, promotes accountability, and ensures that development interventions reflect local needs and priorities (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Gaventa, 2004). When citizens are empowered to contribute to governance processes, they play a critical role in monitoring public service delivery and promoting inclusive development.

Public engagement extends beyond formal participation mechanisms to include broader interactions between the state and society. It involves structured dialogue, stakeholder consultations, partnerships, and collaborative governance approaches aimed at addressing public concerns and improving development outcomes (OECD, 2001; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). In Zambia, public engagement platforms such as town hall meetings, participatory budgeting forums, and multi-stakeholder dialogues have been introduced to foster inclusive development. Effective public engagement strengthens trust between citizens and government institutions while enhancing transparency and responsiveness (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Bryson et al., 2013). Such engagement is critical for ensuring that SDG implementation processes are socially responsive and inclusive.

State–citizen relations form the foundation upon which governance and participation processes operate. These relations reflect the degree of trust, accountability, and interaction between public institutions and the population (Migdal, 2001; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). In the Zambian context, historical political transitions, decentralization reforms, and socio-economic inequalities have shaped the nature of state–citizen engagement. Strong state–citizen relations are characterized by open communication, respect for democratic norms, and institutionalized feedback mechanisms (Fox, 2015; Joshi, 2013). Where trust is weak or accountability mechanisms are limited, citizen confidence in public institutions may decline, affecting sustainable development efforts.

The Sustainable Development Goals emphasize inclusive institutions, partnerships, and participatory governance as critical drivers of sustainable development. Goal 16 highlights the need for peace, justice, and strong institutions, while Goal 17 underscores the importance of partnerships among governments, civil society, and the private sector (UN, 2015; UNDP,

2020). In Zambia, the integration of SDGs into national frameworks requires multi-level collaboration and inclusive planning processes. Inclusive participation of marginalized groups—including women, youth, and rural communities is essential to achieving equitable development outcomes (Cornwall, 2008; Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Without inclusive governance practices, progress toward the SDGs may remain uneven and unsustainable.

Despite policy commitments to governance reform and citizen participation, several challenges continue to limit effective public engagement in Zambia. Limited civic awareness, restricted access to information, resource constraints, and institutional weaknesses can undermine participatory processes (Putnam, 1993; Grindle, 2004). Socio-economic inequalities and geographic disparities may further constrain the ability of vulnerable populations to engage meaningfully in governance mechanisms. Strengthening civic education, promoting transparency through digital governance platforms, and enhancing institutional capacity are necessary to address these gaps (World Bank, 2017; Fox, 2015). Addressing these structural barriers can significantly enhance accountability and sustainable development outcomes.

Although the Sustainable Development Goals provide a comprehensive framework for advancing inclusive and equitable development, their successful realization in Zambia largely depends on the strength of governance systems, the quality of state–citizen relations, and the depth of citizen participation and public engagement. Governance structures shape the spaces and opportunities available for citizens to engage in decision-making, while public engagement mechanisms influence how effectively the state responds to societal needs and development priorities. At the same time, the nature of state–citizen relations determines the level of trust, accountability, and collaboration necessary for collective action toward sustainable development. However, the practical linkages among governance, citizen participation, public engagement, and state–citizen relations in driving progress toward the SDGs remain insufficiently explored in the Zambian context (World Bank, 2020). This interconnected gap underscores the need for a systematic examination of how these five elements interact and mutually reinforce one another in shaping Zambia’s sustainable development trajectory.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite Zambia’s formal commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), progress remains uneven and constrained by persistent governance challenges and limited citizen engagement in development processes. Zambia’s SDG Index score and

national review indicate slow overall progress toward the 2030 Agenda, highlighting gaps in implementation capacity and multisector collaboration (MoFNP, 2023; SDR, 2023). Although national frameworks like the Eighth National Development Plan are aligned with the SDGs, weak accountability mechanisms and insufficient platforms for meaningful public participation have undermined inclusive and effective policy execution (UN, 2023). Research on collaborative governance in Zambia also shows that community participation in local decision-making is often minimal and dominated by formal institutions, limiting citizen influence over development priorities and outcomes (Daka & Madimutsa, 2020). This disconnect between state institutions and society highlights a critical research gap in understanding how governance practices and public engagement jointly influence sustainable development gains. Consequently, examining the respective roles of the state and citizens is essential to identify strategies that enhance participatory governance, strengthen policy implementation, and accelerate Zambia's progress toward achieving the SDGs.

1.3 Study Objectives

- To examine the role of governance structures and institutional practices in facilitating the implementation of SDG-related initiatives in Zambia.
- To assess the extent and effectiveness of citizen engagement in supporting sustainable development outcomes in Zambia.

1.4 Study Questions

- How do governance structures and institutional practices influence the implementation of SDG-related initiatives in Zambia?
- To what extent does citizen engagement contribute to the achievement and sustainability of development outcomes in Zambia?

1.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is anchored on the relationship between governance, citizen engagement, and sustainable development outcomes (SDGs) in Zambia. Governance, characterized by institutional structures, policy frameworks, transparency, and accountability mechanisms, serves as a key determinant of how effectively SDG-related initiatives are implemented (UNDP, 2022). Citizen engagement, including participation in decision-making, awareness of SDG priorities, and collaboration with government institutions, complements governance by promoting accountability, inclusiveness, and ownership of development initiatives (Chama & Mwanza, 2021). The framework posits that sustainable development

outcomes are influenced both directly by governance practices and indirectly through active citizen participation. This approach highlights the synergistic interaction between the state and society, suggesting that achieving the SDGs in Zambia requires not only effective institutional arrangements but also meaningful public involvement in planning, implementation, and monitoring of development programs.



Figure1: Conceptual Framework on Governance, Citizen Engagement and Sustainable Development.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to enhance understanding of the intricate relationship between governance, public engagement, and sustainable development in Zambia, with broader implications for Africa. By examining the roles of both the state and citizens in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the study provides valuable insights into how inclusive governance and active citizen participation can accelerate national development objectives. It contributes to academic knowledge by bridging gaps in literature on the interaction between government policies, civic participation, and sustainable outcomes in the Zambian context. Practically, the findings can inform policymakers, development practitioners, and civil society organizations on effective strategies to strengthen transparency, accountability, and citizen involvement in development initiatives. Moreover,

the study highlights the importance of shared responsibility between state actors and citizens in addressing socio-economic challenges, promoting equitable resource distribution, and ensuring that Zambia meets its commitments to the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

2.METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The rationale for using a mixed-methods approach was to obtain comprehensive and triangulated evidence on governance practices, citizen engagement mechanisms, and their influence on the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Zambia. The quantitative component enabled the measurement of trends, patterns, and relationships between governance quality and public participation in SDG processes. The qualitative component provided deeper insights into stakeholder experiences, perceptions, and institutional practices that influence sustainable development outcomes. The study was conducted in selected provinces of Zambia to ensure representation of diverse socio-economic and governance contexts. These included Lusaka Province (urban setting), Copperbelt Province (industrial region), Eastern Province (largely rural), and Southern Province (mixed rural-urban context). The selection of multiple provinces enhanced the generalizability of findings across different governance and development environments within the country. The target population was 4000 participants with a sample size of 400 which is 10% of the target population. The sample included; 40 Government officials at national and sub-national levels involved in SDG coordination and implementation, 40 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) engaged in governance and SDG advocacy, 40 Development partners and SDG focal persons and 280 Ordinary citizens residing in selected communities. Stratified random sampling was used to select citizen respondents, ensuring representation across gender, age groups, and urban-rural categories.

While, purposive sampling was employed to select key informants based on their expertise, experience, and involvement in SDG implementation. Structured questionnaires were administered to citizens. The questionnaire captured information on demographic characteristics, awareness of SDGs, perceptions of governance quality, participation in public forums, and perceptions of progress toward sustainable development. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with policymakers, government officials, CSO leaders, and development partners to gather in-depth information on governance frameworks,

coordination mechanisms, and public participation processes. Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize data. Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Data were coded into categories and themes reflecting governance practices, public participation mechanisms, and challenges affecting sustainable development implementation. The study adhered to ethical standards by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. Data were used solely for academic purposes, and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 The Role of Governance Structures and Institutional Practices in Facilitating the Implementation of SDG-Related Initiatives

The findings from the 400 participants revealed strong recognition of Zambia's efforts to align national policies with the SDGs (72%) and involve multiple stakeholders in implementation (80%). However, significant challenges were identified, including weak institutional coordination (75%), bureaucratic inefficiencies (74%), inadequate local funding (71%), and limited technical capacity (65%). Participants also highlighted resource constraints in public service delivery (78%) and weak enforcement of accountability mechanisms (73%) as major barriers to effective SDG implementation. Overall, while governance structures and decentralization provide a foundation for sustainable development, improved coordination, accountability, capacity building, and resource allocation remain essential for achieving SDG targets in Zambia. Table 1 below summarized these findings;

Table1: The Role of Governance Structures and Institutional Practices in Facilitating the Implementation of SDG-Related Initiatives.

Study Theme	Key Finding	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage (%)
Policy Alignment with SDGs	Participants indicated that Zambia has aligned national development plans and policies with the SDGs.	288	72.0
Uneven SDG Integration Across Sectors	Respondents reported that some ministries effectively mainstream SDGs while others show limited integration.	264	66.0
Multi-Stakeholder	Participants acknowledged the	320	80.0

Study Theme	Key Finding	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage (%)
Involvement	involvement of government, NGOs, civil society, and international partners in SDG implementation.		
Weak Institutional Coordination	Respondents observed poor communication and coordination among implementing institutions.	300	75.0
Duplication of Roles and Programmes	Participants reported overlapping mandates and similar projects being implemented by different institutions.	248	62.0
Importance of Decentralized Governance	Respondents agreed that local authorities play a critical role in addressing community development needs.	304	76.0
Financial Constraints at Local Level	Participants indicated that inadequate and delayed funding limits local SDG implementation.	284	71.0
Limited Technical Capacity	Respondents highlighted shortages of skilled personnel and inadequate training in local institutions.	260	65.0
Existence of Accountability Mechanisms	Participants confirmed the presence of reporting, auditing, and monitoring systems.	272	68.0
Weak Enforcement of Accountability Measures	Respondents noted inconsistent implementation of transparency and accountability mechanisms.	292	73.0
Limited Citizen Access to Information	Participants reported inadequate access to information on government projects and SDG progress.	276	69.0
Importance of Public Service Delivery	Respondents identified education, health, and water services as critical for achieving SDGs.	332	83.0
Bureaucratic Inefficiencies	Participants indicated that lengthy procedures and administrative delays hinder programme implementation.	296	74.0
Resource Constraints in Service Delivery	Respondents reported inadequate funding, infrastructure, and materials affecting	312	78.0

Study Theme	Key Finding	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage (%)
	service provision.		

According to the findings, the study revealed that governance structures in Zambia have made deliberate efforts to align national policies with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). National development frameworks, particularly medium- and long-term plans such as Vision 2030 and successive National Development Plans, reflect a growing commitment to integrating global development priorities into local policy agendas (GRZ, 2006; UN, 2015). This alignment demonstrates the government's recognition of the SDGs as a guiding framework for sustainable development and national transformation. Furthermore, policy documents increasingly incorporate SDG indicators and targets, showing an attempt to localize global goals within Zambia's socio-economic context (MNDP, 2017). This approach has helped to establish a structured pathway for addressing key development challenges such as poverty reduction, education, health, and environmental sustainability.

However, despite these efforts, the findings indicated that policy alignment is not uniformly implemented across all sectors. Some ministries, particularly those dealing with health, education, and environmental management, have effectively mainstreamed SDG targets into their operational plans. In contrast, others continue to operate with limited integration, often treating SDGs as peripheral rather than central to their mandates (UNDP, 2020). This uneven adoption is partly attributed to differences in institutional capacity, levels of awareness, and availability of financial and technical resources across government departments (World Bank, 2021). As a result, policy gaps emerge, weakening the overall coherence required for effective SDG implementation. In some cases, the absence of clear implementation guidelines further complicates efforts to translate policy commitments into tangible outcomes.

The inconsistencies in policy alignment were also found to significantly affect inter-sectoral collaboration. When ministries adopt different approaches to SDG integration, it becomes difficult to establish unified implementation strategies and shared accountability mechanisms. This fragmentation limits the potential for coordinated action, particularly in addressing cross-cutting issues such as climate change, youth unemployment, and social inequality (OECD, 2019). Consequently, opportunities for synergy and collective impact are often lost, leading to duplication of efforts and inefficiencies in resource utilization and programme delivery. In a context where development challenges are interconnected, the lack of a

harmonized approach undermines the effectiveness of governance systems in achieving sustainable outcomes.

This finding supports the argument that policy alignment alone is insufficient without institutional coherence and coordination. As emphasized by Nilsson et al., (2016), successful SDG implementation requires not only alignment at the policy level but also harmonization across sectors to ensure consistency and effectiveness in execution. In the case of Zambia, strengthening coordination mechanisms such as inter-ministerial committees, monitoring frameworks, and integrated planning systems is essential for bridging existing gaps (UNDP, 2020). Additionally, enhancing capacity-building initiatives and promoting a shared understanding of SDG priorities across institutions can foster a more cohesive approach to implementation. Ultimately, one of the participants noted that:

“Achieving the SDGs depends on the ability of governance structures to move beyond policy alignment toward integrated and collaborative action”.

The study further established that multiple institutions in Zambia are actively involved in implementing SDG-related initiatives, including government ministries, statutory agencies, local authorities, and cooperating partners such as international organizations and civil society groups. Key actors include institutions aligned with the United Nations system, development partners, and non-governmental organizations working across sectors such as health, education, agriculture, and environmental sustainability (OECD 2020). This multi-actor involvement reflects an inclusive governance approach that recognizes the complexity and interconnected nature of sustainable development challenges. One participant emphasized this by stating: one of the participants stated that:

“There are many players involved in implementing SDG programmes, from government ministries to NGOs and international partners, which shows that development is a shared responsibility.”

Another respondent noted:

“The involvement of different institutions brings in diverse expertise and resources that are necessary for addressing complex development issues.”

Similar observations have been made in countries such as Sweden and Germany, where multi-stakeholder engagement has been identified as a key driver of SDG success (UN, 2018).

Despite this inclusive framework, the findings revealed that coordination among these institutions remains weak. Limited communication channels, unclear institutional roles, and overlapping mandates often result in fragmented implementation efforts (Ahmed & Islam, 2019). In many cases, institutions operate in silos, with minimal information sharing or joint planning, which undermines the effectiveness of SDG initiatives. One participant explained:

“Most institutions work independently, and there is very little coordination in terms of planning and implementation.”

Another added:

“We often do not know what other ministries or organizations are doing, which makes it difficult to align our programmes.”

Studies from Kenya and India similarly highlight coordination gaps as a major barrier to SDG implementation (World Bank, 2021; Tosun & Leininger, 2017). The absence of a strong central coordination mechanism further exacerbates fragmentation and reduces policy coherence.

In addition, duplication of roles and responsibilities was identified as a recurring challenge across institutions. Several ministries and cooperating partners were found to be implementing similar programmes without adequate collaboration or alignment. This duplication leads to inefficiencies and the wastage of limited financial and human resources (UNDP, 2020). One participant highlighted this issue by stating:

“You find that two or three institutions are running almost the same programmes in the same communities without coordinating.”

Another respondent remarked:

“Resources are being wasted because there is no proper system to ensure that institutions complement each other instead of duplicating efforts.”

Furthermore, overlapping initiatives can create confusion among beneficiaries and weaken accountability mechanisms. As one participant noted: “Communities sometimes get confused because different organizations come with similar projects but with different approaches.”

Comparable findings have been reported in countries such as Nigeria and Bangladesh, where institutional fragmentation has hindered integrated development outcomes (Ahmed & Islam, 2019).

These findings align with existing literature which highlights that effective SDG implementation depends on strong coordination mechanisms and integrated governance systems (OECD, 2020). According to the UN (2018), achieving the SDGs requires coherent institutional arrangements, clear role definition, and robust collaboration frameworks that promote synergy among stakeholders. Supporting this, one participant stated:

“If there was better coordination and communication among institutions, the impact of SDG programmes would be much greater.”

Another added:

“We need a central body that ensures all stakeholders are working together towards the same goals.”

Evidence from countries such as Finland and South Korea shows that strong central coordination bodies and integrated governance systems significantly enhance SDG performance (Tosun & Leininger, 2017; World Bank, 2021). In the context of Zambia, strengthening inter-institutional coordination through formal platforms, policy harmonization, and improved communication systems is therefore essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable development outcomes.

The study found that decentralized governance structures in Zambia play a significant role in facilitating SDG implementation at the local level. Local authorities, including district councils and municipal offices, are strategically positioned to understand and respond to the specific needs of their communities. By being closer to the grassroots, these institutions are able to identify local priorities, mobilize community participation, and tailor development initiatives that reflect the unique socio-economic and environmental contexts of their areas. One participant highlighted:

“As a council, we know the challenges our community faces, so we can plan programmes that address real local needs rather than general national priorities.”

Similar findings have been observed in countries such as Kenya and Uganda, where decentralized structures have been shown to enhance local responsiveness and improve the relevance of SDG programmes (Smoke, 2015; UNDP, 2018).

However, the effectiveness of decentralization in Zambia is constrained by limited financial resources at the local level. Many local authorities depend heavily on central government funding, which is often insufficient and delayed, affecting their ability to execute planned programmes. A participant explained:

“We receive allocations from the central government, but the funds are sometimes late or not enough, which makes it difficult to implement community projects.”

This dependency on central funding limits flexibility, reduces the scope for innovative local solutions, and often forces councils to prioritize urgent needs over long-term SDG initiatives. Studies from other countries, including Ghana and Tanzania, show similar challenges where financial constraints hinder local authorities from fully realizing the potential of decentralization in sustainable development (OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

Furthermore, the study revealed that local institutions face challenges related to technical and administrative capacity. A shortage of skilled personnel and inadequate training restrict their ability to design, implement, and monitor development programmes effectively. One local official stated:

“Even when we have funds, we often lack the technical skills to develop proper project plans or monitor progress against SDG targets.”

This capacity gap weakens the overall impact of decentralized governance and may result in poorly coordinated interventions that fail to achieve intended outcomes. Evidence from countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines suggests that capacity-building at the local level is critical to ensuring that decentralized systems can manage development projects successfully (Tosun & Leininger, 2017).

The findings suggest that decentralization can only be effective when supported by adequate resources and capacity-building initiatives. Empowering local governments through financial support, technical assistance, and targeted training programs strengthens their ability to deliver SDG-related services efficiently. As one participant emphasized:

“If we are given the resources and skills, we can make real progress in implementing SDG projects that benefit our communities.”

This supports the argument that empowering local governments is essential for achieving sustainable development, particularly in contexts where local realities significantly influence

development outcomes. Studies from countries such as South Africa and Brazil also highlight that capacity enhancement and resource allocation at the local level are critical for effective SDG implementation and sustainable community development (Falleti, 2010; Pires & Schneider, 2016). Overall, the study highlights that decentralization is a powerful governance tool, but its success depends on addressing structural and capacity limitations to ensure meaningful local impact.

The study also highlighted that governance institutions in Zambia have established mechanisms aimed at promoting transparency and accountability in SDG implementation. These include reporting systems that track progress against targets, audit frameworks to ensure proper financial management, and public oversight structures such as parliamentary committees, anti-corruption agencies, and citizen monitoring platforms (UNDP, 2018; Nshimbi & Mutale, 2020). One participant emphasized the importance of these mechanisms, stating:

“We have put in place regular reporting and auditing systems to make sure that resources allocated for SDG projects are used responsibly.”

Similar accountability frameworks have been documented in countries such as South Africa and Kenya, where institutionalized transparency mechanisms have strengthened citizen trust and improved program delivery (OECD, 2020; Ayee, 2016).

Despite the presence of these accountability mechanisms, the study found that their enforcement is often inconsistent across institutions. Many processes for oversight are weakly implemented or lack sufficient support from higher authorities, which diminishes their effectiveness. One participant noted:

“Even though we have reporting structures, follow-ups are rare, and sometimes recommendations from audits are not acted upon.”

Similar challenges have been observed in Nigeria and Ghana, where weak enforcement of accountability frameworks has undermined the effectiveness of development programmes (Adepoju, 2017; Appiah, 2018). The findings suggest that without strong institutional backing and clear enforcement mechanisms, even well-designed transparency initiatives are unlikely to produce meaningful results.

The study also revealed that limited access to information and weak public participation further undermine accountability. Citizens often lack timely and adequate information about

government projects, budgets, and SDG progress, making it difficult to hold institutions accountable for their actions. A participant stated:

“People in the community are rarely informed about what the council or ministries are doing, so they cannot demand accountability.”

In addition, participatory mechanisms such as community meetings or feedback platforms are underutilized, further limiting citizen engagement. Evidence from Tanzania and Uganda shows that enhancing citizen participation and access to information strengthens social accountability and improves governance outcomes (Bukenya & Barkan, 2016; Mushi, 2019). These findings reinforce the view that transparency and accountability are essential for effective governance and sustainable development, but they must be actively enforced and supported by citizen engagement.

The study established that the effectiveness of public service delivery systems is central to the achievement of SDGs in Zambia. Sectors such as education, health, and water provision are directly linked to multiple SDG targets, including SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) (Mutale, 2019; Kanyinga, 2018). These sectors are therefore critical areas of focus for sustainable development initiatives. One participant emphasized the importance of these services, stating:

“If schools, health centers, and water facilities are functioning well, it directly impacts the well-being and development of our communities.”

Evidence from other African countries, such as Rwanda and Ghana, also highlights that effective service delivery in key sectors is a prerequisite for achieving meaningful SDG outcomes (Boakye & Agyeman, 2020; UNECA, 2019).

However, the findings revealed that public service delivery in Zambia is often hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies. Lengthy administrative procedures, rigid hierarchies, and delays in decision-making limit the timely implementation of development programmes (Osei-Tutu, 2017). A participant noted:

“Even when funds are available, approvals and clearances take so long that projects are delayed or fail to meet their intended timelines.”

Similar challenges have been observed in countries such as Kenya and Tanzania, where bureaucratic bottlenecks reduce the efficiency and responsiveness of public institutions, negatively impacting service accessibility and quality (Bukonya & Barkan, 2016; Mushi, 2019). These inefficiencies not only affect service delivery but also erode public trust in government institutions tasked with managing critical development programs.

In addition, resource constraints were identified as a major challenge affecting service delivery. Limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and shortages of essential materials reduce the capacity of institutions to meet the needs of the population, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Ademola & Adeyemi, 2020). One participant remarked:

“We often cannot provide basic services because there are not enough resources or the infrastructure is not sufficient to reach all communities.”

Comparable findings from South Africa and Uganda show that resource inadequacies exacerbate disparities in service provision, creating inequities in access to essential services (Ayee, 2016; Nshimbi & Mutale, 2020). The study suggested that improving institutional efficiency and addressing resource gaps are essential for enhancing public service delivery outcomes. Strengthening these systems aligns with research indicating that strong, responsive, and adequately resourced public institutions are key to achieving sustainable development goals (UNECA, 2019; Boakye & Agyeman, 2020).

3.2. The Extent and Effectiveness of Citizen Engagement in Supporting Sustainable Development Outcomes

The study established that citizen engagement plays a critical role in supporting sustainable development outcomes in Zambia, although the extent and effectiveness of participation vary across sectors and communities. The study findings indicated that citizens are increasingly involved in development processes through community meetings, public consultations, Constituency Development Fund (CDF) committees, Ward Development Committees, civil society organizations, and local governance structures, reflecting the growing emphasis on participatory governance in the country (Kunda, 2018). The decentralization agenda and legislative frameworks have created opportunities for citizens to participate in planning, budgeting, monitoring, and implementation of development projects, thereby enhancing democratic accountability and local ownership of development initiatives (Silomba, 2020).

The findings further revealed that citizen involvement has contributed to improved transparency in public resource utilization and strengthened the responsiveness of

government institutions to community needs. The study established that development interventions tend to be more effective and sustainable when local communities are involved in identifying priorities and making decisions regarding project implementation (Chikulo, 2009). This participation enables citizens to voice their concerns, influence policy decisions, and ensure that development programs address actual community needs rather than externally imposed priorities (Chanda et al., 2024). Furthermore, citizen engagement was found to promote accountability by empowering communities to monitor public projects and demand improved service delivery from duty bearers. Through local governance structures and community-based organizations, citizens are increasingly able to track the progress of development initiatives and hold public officials accountable for the utilization of public resources (Ng'andu, 2021). The findings suggest that inclusive participation mechanisms foster collaboration between citizens and government institutions, strengthen trust, and enhance social cohesion, all of which are important ingredients for sustainable development. However, despite these positive developments, respondents highlighted that the level of participation remains uneven across communities. Factors such as limited civic awareness, inadequate access to information, low levels of education, and resource constraints continue to hinder meaningful citizen engagement, particularly in rural areas (Chanda, 2024). Consequently, while citizen participation has made significant contributions to sustainable development efforts in Zambia, there remains a need to strengthen civic education, improve access to information, and enhance institutional mechanisms that facilitate inclusive participation in governance processes (Kunda, 2018).

The findings further revealed that citizen engagement has contributed positively to identifying local development priorities, improving transparency, strengthening accountability, and enhancing community ownership of development initiatives. Communities that actively participated in decision-making processes reported greater satisfaction with development projects and demonstrated stronger commitment to maintaining community infrastructure and services (Masaiti & Kamanga, 2026). Citizen participation was found to be particularly effective in areas such as local development planning, environmental management, education, health initiatives, and CDF project implementation. Respondents emphasized that involving community members in the planning and implementation stages of development projects enabled local needs and priorities to be accurately identified, thereby reducing the likelihood of resource misallocation and project failure (Silomba, 2020). As a result, development interventions

were perceived as more relevant, inclusive, and responsive to the socio-economic realities of the communities they were intended to serve.

The study further established that citizen engagement enhanced transparency by providing opportunities for communities to access information regarding project budgets, implementation timelines, and expected outcomes. Through public meetings, stakeholder consultations, and community monitoring mechanisms, citizens were able to scrutinize development activities and demand accountability from public officials and project implementers. This increased oversight contributed to improved management of public resources and reduced opportunities for corruption and misuse of funds (Chikulo, 2009). Participants noted that:

“Regular interactions between citizens and local authorities fostered a culture of openness and mutual accountability, which strengthened trust in governance institutions and encouraged greater public confidence in development processes”.

In addition, the findings showed that citizen participation played a significant role in fostering community ownership of development initiatives. When community members were consulted and involved in project decision-making processes, they developed a stronger sense of responsibility toward the success and sustainability of those projects. This was particularly evident in the maintenance of schools, health facilities, water supply systems, sanitation infrastructure, and environmental conservation projects, where local residents voluntarily contributed labor, resources, and monitoring efforts to ensure long-term functionality (Chanda, 2024b). Such ownership not only enhanced the sustainability of development outcomes but also reduced dependency on external support and promoted self-reliance within communities.

The study also found that citizen engagement facilitated collective problem-solving and strengthened social cohesion within communities. Through participatory forums, individuals from diverse social, economic, and demographic backgrounds were able to discuss common challenges and jointly identify solutions. This collaborative approach encouraged inclusivity, promoted community solidarity, and strengthened partnerships between citizens, local leaders, civil society organizations, and government institutions (Nswana & Simuyaba, 2021). In sectors such as education and health, community participation supported the identification of service delivery gaps, mobilization of local resources, and monitoring of project performance, leading to improved service provision and increased beneficiary satisfaction.

Furthermore, respondents observed that active citizen involvement in CDF projects enhanced project effectiveness and accountability by ensuring that funded projects reflected genuine community priorities. Community members reported that participation in project selection, monitoring, and evaluation processes improved confidence in the utilization of public resources and increased the likelihood of project success (Ng'andu, 2021). Overall, the findings suggest that citizen engagement serves as an important mechanism for promoting inclusive governance, improving development effectiveness, and strengthening the sustainability of development initiatives at the local level (Chanda et al., 2024b). The evidence indicates that communities that are actively engaged in governance processes are more likely to support, protect, and sustain development projects over the long term, thereby contributing to broader sustainable development goals in Zambia (Silomba, 2020).

The study also found that civil society organizations serve as important intermediaries between citizens and government institutions by promoting awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), facilitating dialogue, advocating for marginalized groups, and encouraging public participation in governance processes. These organizations have played a key role in strengthening civic literacy and empowering communities to engage in development discourse through structured platforms such as community forums, policy dialogues, and social accountability initiatives (Chanda et al., 2024c). In Zambia, civil society engagement has been widely recognized as a critical pillar of decentralization reforms aimed at enhancing participatory governance and inclusive development (Matole et al., 2023). Globally, similar roles of civil society in strengthening democratic participation and bridging gaps between state and citizens have been documented across developing democracies, where they contribute to accountability, transparency, and policy responsiveness (World Bank, 2021; UNDP, 2022).

Despite these positive developments, the study identified several challenges limiting the effectiveness of citizen engagement. Many respondents reported inadequate awareness of SDGs and development policies, limited access to information, low levels of civic education, and insufficient feedback mechanisms from government institutions. These challenges reflect broader weaknesses in participatory governance systems where institutional communication between state actors and citizens remains limited or unstructured. In Zambia, studies have shown that such barriers are often linked to weak civic education frameworks and inadequate decentralized communication systems, which reduce the effectiveness of citizen participation in development planning (Nswana & Simuyaba, 2021; Silomba, 2020). International evidence also indicates that when civic knowledge is low and feedback loops are weak,

participation tends to remain symbolic rather than substantive, limiting citizens' influence on decision-making outcomes (UN, 2023).

As a result, participation often remains consultative rather than fully collaborative, reducing citizens' influence on final policy decisions. In many cases, citizens are engaged at the level of information sharing or consultation, but their inputs are not consistently integrated into final policy outcomes, thereby limiting the depth of participatory governance. This pattern has been widely observed in decentralization systems where institutional structures for participatory decision-making are still evolving and where power remains largely centralized despite formal policy commitments to devolution (Chikulo, 2009). Comparative global studies further show that meaningful participation requires not only consultation mechanisms but also institutionalized power-sharing arrangements that allow citizens to co-decide and co-manage development processes (Arnstein, 1969; UNDP, 2022).

The findings further indicated that participation levels are generally higher in urban areas than in rural communities due to disparities in access to information, communication technologies, and governance platforms. Urban residents benefit from closer proximity to administrative centres, better internet connectivity, higher literacy levels, and more frequent engagement opportunities through formal structures such as public meetings, stakeholder consultations, and digital platforms (OECD, 2020). In contrast, rural communities often experience limited outreach from government institutions, poor communication infrastructure, and infrequent civic engagement activities, which collectively reduce their ability to participate meaningfully in development processes. These spatial inequalities create uneven patterns of inclusion, where certain groups are more able to influence decision-making processes than others, thereby affecting the equity of development outcomes, a pattern also observed in participatory governance studies across Sub-Saharan Africa (Adeleke & Oni, 2021).

Women, youth, and vulnerable groups continue to face barriers that restrict their meaningful involvement in development decision-making processes, despite policy commitments to inclusive participation. These barriers include cultural norms, limited access to education, lack of financial resources, time constraints, and underrepresentation in formal governance structures. In many cases, women's participation is constrained by traditional expectations that prioritize domestic responsibilities, while youth often face exclusion due to perceptions of limited experience or influence. Similarly, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups encounter accessibility challenges and limited representation in decision-making forums. Similar findings have been reported in Ghana and Kenya, where socio-cultural and

structural inequalities continue to limit equitable participation in local governance and development planning (Osei-Akoto & Quartey, 2020; Wanjiku & Mutuku, 2021). These findings align with broader evidence that inclusive governance requires deliberate institutional reforms to address structural inequalities that persist within participatory systems (UN, 2023).

Additionally, the study found that effective citizen engagement is closely linked to transparency, trust, and responsiveness of public institutions. Where government agencies regularly communicate with communities, provide feedback, and incorporate public recommendations into development plans, citizen participation tends to be more active and productive. Such responsiveness enhances citizens' confidence in governance systems and encourages sustained engagement in public affairs. In contrast, where communication is weak or feedback is absent, citizens often perceive engagement processes as symbolic rather than meaningful, which reduces motivation to participate in future initiatives (Chanda et al., 2024d). Similar patterns have been documented in participatory development programs in Nigeria and South Africa, where weak feedback mechanisms undermine citizen trust and reduce engagement levels (Afolabi & Adeyemi, 2021; Moyo & Ndlovu, 2020). This dynamic highlights the importance of institutional accountability mechanisms in strengthening participatory governance systems (World Bank, 2021).

Conversely, perceptions that citizen views are ignored discourage future participation and weaken public confidence in governance processes. When communities feel that their input does not influence final decisions, levels of trust in public institutions decline, leading to apathy and reduced civic involvement. Over time, this can undermine the effectiveness of decentralization reforms and weaken the sustainability of development initiatives, as citizens become less willing to contribute time, resources, and local knowledge to public projects. Evidence from decentralisation experiences in Uganda and Tanzania similarly shows that weak feedback loops and tokenistic participation significantly reduce the long-term effectiveness of citizen engagement systems (Kisembo & Lule, 2019; Mallya & Kessy, 2022). Strengthening feedback loops, ensuring visible incorporation of citizen input, and enhancing transparency in decision-making processes are therefore essential for sustaining meaningful engagement and building long-term trust between citizens and government institutions (UNDP, 2022).

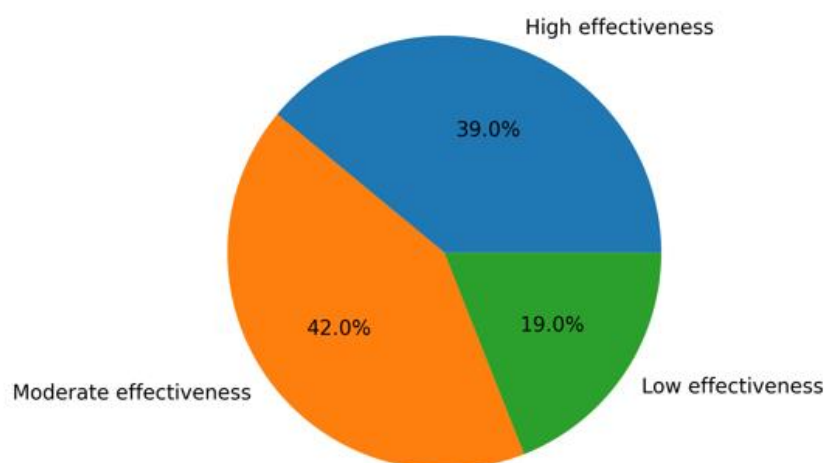


Figure 1: Effectiveness of Citizen Engagement in Supporting SDGs in Zambia (N=400)

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study;

- The Government of Zambia, in collaboration with civil society organizations and local authorities, should have expanded civic education and public awareness programmes to increase citizens' understanding of governance processes and the SDGs. Efforts should have focused on promoting inclusive participation among women, youth, persons with disabilities, and rural communities through community dialogues, digital platforms, and local governance structures .
- Government institutions should have strengthened mechanisms for transparency and accountability by improving public access to information, publishing regular progress reports on SDG implementation, and creating accessible feedback channels for citizens. This would have enabled greater public trust, encouraged active engagement in governance processes, and promoted effective monitoring of development initiatives.
- The government should have fostered stronger collaboration among public institutions, civil society organizations, private sector actors, development partners, and local communities in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of development programmes. Such partnerships would have facilitated resource mobilization, enhanced policy coordination, and improved the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions aimed at achieving the SDGs in Zambia.

5. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that governance and public engagement were fundamental pillars in advancing sustainable development and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs) in Zambia. The findings demonstrated that effective governance, characterized by transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and responsiveness, created an enabling environment for sustainable development initiatives. Equally, meaningful citizen participation enhanced the legitimacy, effectiveness, and sustainability of development policies and programs by ensuring that community needs and priorities were reflected in decision-making processes. While Zambia had made notable progress in integrating the SDGs into national development frameworks and strengthening participatory governance mechanisms, challenges such as limited public awareness, inadequate access to information, resource constraints, weak institutional capacity, and unequal participation among marginalized groups continued to hinder optimal outcomes. The study further established that collaborative partnerships among government institutions, civil society organizations, local communities, and development partners were essential for promoting inclusive development and accelerating SDG implementation. Therefore, the study concluded that strengthening governance systems, expanding civic engagement opportunities, enhancing transparency, and empowering citizens through education and access to information were critical strategies for improving development outcomes and supporting Zambia's efforts to achieve sustainable development while ensuring that no one was left behind.

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