



Traditional Authorities in Decentralised Public Administration: Hybrid Governance, Institutional Accountability and Rural Service Delivery in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Decentralised public administration in rural Zimbabwe depends on effective coordination between customary authorities, elected representatives, and administrative institutions, making the functioning of hybrid governance arrangements directly relevant to public governance, regulation, and law. Existing studies have examined the constitutional recognition of traditional leadership and the broader implementation of devolution, but ward-level evidence on how stakeholders perceive legitimacy, coordination failures, resource asymmetries, and accountability within everyday rural service delivery remains limited. This study aims to examine how chiefs, headmen, and village heads interact with councillors and rural district structures in supporting health, education, water, and infrastructure services in Wards 25–30 of Masvingo South. The empirical material consists of semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2026 with 38 purposively selected traditional leaders, councillors, rural district council representatives, extension officers, and community members, with thematic saturation reached before completing the full sample. Interviews lasting 25–40 minutes were conducted in English or Shona, transcribed and translated where necessary, coded inductively and deductively in NVivo 14, and analysed thematically through hybrid governance theory and institutional legitimacy, while member checking with 12 participants and peer debriefing were used to strengthen trustworthiness. The findings show that traditional authorities were perceived to convert culturally embedded legitimacy into community mobilisation, participation, and project ownership in clinic support, school-enrolment activities, borehole siting, infrastructure maintenance, and local dispute mediation. A second pattern concerns a legitimacy–resource mismatch in which customary actors were reported to carry substantial mobilisation and maintenance responsibilities while lacking corresponding fiscal authority, formal decision rights, and material support. A third pattern concerns mandate ambiguity and partisan pressure, which were perceived to generate bypassed procedures, competition over authority, delayed coordination, and weakened accountability between traditional leaders, councillors, and rural district structures. The study contributes to research on decentralised public administration by showing that hybrid governance operates as a negotiated administrative interface rather than a stable institutional settlement, and the findings may inform devolution policy, statutory clarification, inter-institutional coordination, and future comparative research in settings where customary and formal governance systems coexist.

Keywords: Traditional authorities, Hybrid governance, Accountability.

INTRODUCTION

Rural public administration in Zimbabwe operates through a hybrid institutional landscape in which customary authorities, elected representatives, and bureaucratic structures coexist and interact. Since the adoption of the 2013 Constitution, this coexistence has been formally recognised; yet the practical coordination of these actors in the delivery of essential public services remains uneven and frequently contested. In communal areas, where formal state capacity is often limited, traditional leaders continue to exercise significant influence over community mobilisation, local dispute resolution, and the everyday

management of development initiatives. The resulting interface raises important questions of institutional accountability, regulatory clarity, and the effective translation of constitutional devolution into tangible service outcomes.

The legal and administrative context is defined primarily by Chapters 14 and 15 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe. Chapter 14 establishes a framework for the devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities to provincial and local tiers, while Chapter 15 formally recognises traditional leaders and assigns them roles in promoting cultural values, community development, the administration of communal land, and the resolution of disputes. These provisions position chiefs, headmen, and village heads as constitutionally acknowledged actors within the broader architecture of local governance. In practice, however, their functions intersect with those of Rural District Councils (RDCs) and elected ward councillors under the Rural District Councils Act and the Traditional Leaders Act. The absence of fully harmonised statutory interfaces has left substantial room for overlapping mandates, ambiguous decision rights, and uneven patterns of coordination.

This institutional arrangement carries direct consequences for public service delivery. In rural districts such as Masvingo South, communities depend on the combined efforts of customary and formal actors for the construction and maintenance of clinics, the promotion of school enrolment, the siting and upkeep of water infrastructure, and the mediation of local conflicts that can delay development projects. Where coordination functions effectively, traditional authority can convert cultural legitimacy into collective action and project ownership. Where it does not, service delivery is characterised by delayed implementation, contested authority, and the off-loading of maintenance responsibilities onto actors who lack corresponding fiscal and administrative powers. The quality of the hybrid interface therefore constitutes a critical determinant of equity and sustainability in rural public services.

These dynamics are of direct relevance to the study of public governance, regulation, and law. Hybrid governance arrangements test the capacity of constitutional and statutory frameworks to produce coherent administrative practice. They raise questions about designing inter-institutional accountability mechanisms, the regulation of overlapping jurisdictions, and the conditions under which culturally embedded authority can be productively aligned with formal systems of public administration. Understanding how traditional authorities, councillors, and rural district structures interact at ward level is therefore essential for refining both the regulatory architecture of devolution and the practical realisation of its service-delivery objectives. Against this background, the research problem centres on the limited empirical understanding of how hybrid governance is enacted and experienced in everyday provision of rural public services following the 2013 constitutional reforms. While the formal recognition of traditional leadership is now established, the local-level processes through which customary and formal actors coordinate or fail to coordinate in the domains of health, education, and water infrastructure remain insufficiently examined.

The aim of this study is to examine how traditional authorities interact with councillors and rural district structures in supporting health, education, water, and infrastructure services in Wards 25--30 of Masvingo South, and to analyse the implications of these interactions for institutional accountability and rural service delivery. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do stakeholders perceive the role of traditional authorities as hybrid actors within the decentralised public administration framework established by the 2013 Constitution?
- In what ways do traditional leaders contribute to the delivery of health, education, and water infrastructure services at ward level?
- What challenges of coordination, mandate clarity, and political interference characterise collaboration between traditional authorities, councillors, and Rural District Council structures?
- What institutional arrangements do stakeholders identify as necessary to strengthen hybrid governance and improve the sustainability of rural service delivery?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the theoretical and empirical foundations for understanding hybrid governance in rural public administration, with particular attention to the role of traditional authorities in decentralised service delivery. It begins by outlining the conceptual frameworks of hybrid governance and institutional legitimacy that inform the study, before reviewing comparative African evidence on customary leaders' contributions to and constraints in rural service provision. The review then focuses specifically on Zimbabwe, tracing scholarly debates on traditional authorities, devolution and service delivery following the 2013 constitutional reforms. Finally, it identifies the empirical gap in ward-level stakeholder perceptions of hybrid coordination that the present study addresses. In doing so, the review establishes both the scholarly grounding for the inquiry and the precise contribution that the study makes to existing knowledge on traditional authorities and decentralised public administration in Zimbabwe.

Conceptual Foundations: Hybrid Governance and Institutional Legitimacy

Hybrid governance theory provides the primary conceptual lens for this study. It posits that traditional and modern forms of authority need not stand in zero-sum opposition; rather, they can form dynamic, interdependent relationships that generate public authority under conditions of limited state capacity (Bagayoko et al., 2016; Motadi & Sikhwari, 2024). The concept intersects with legal pluralism and everyday statehood, recognising that customary leaders and formal administrative systems frequently operate side by side and in mutual dependence (Beall & Ngonyama, 2009; Ray & van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, 1996; Ubink, 2008). Institutional legitimacy theory further distinguishes between input legitimacy rooted in the cultural embeddedness and historical trust commanded by traditional authorities and output legitimacy derived from tangible service outcomes, while empirical research confirms the continuing significance of traditional leadership in rural support systems (Logan, 2009; Ringson, 2020). Together these frameworks direct attention not merely to the coexistence of customary and formal institutions, but to the conditions under which that coexistence produces coherent coordination or persistent friction.

Comparative African Evidence on Traditional Authorities and Service Delivery

A substantial body of comparative African research has examined the roles of traditional authorities in rural service provision. Studies in South Africa have documented customary involvement in land governance, municipal service delivery, and water and sanitation provision, showing that traditional endorsement can improve community acceptance and post-construction maintenance (Bazaanah & Mothapo, 2024; Faboye et al., 2024; Pearson, 2024; Selepe, 2009). Research across African settings has similarly highlighted the capacity of chiefs to mobilise communities for health outreach, clean-water initiatives, and local development, particularly during periods of state weakness or crisis response (Hendrickse, 2024; Hove et al., 2019; Jackson & Marquette, 2003). These studies, predominantly qualitative or mixed-methods and conducted at district or community level, establish that traditional leaders frequently supply social mobilisation capacity, indigenous ecological knowledge, and local dispute-resolution functions that formal agencies struggle to replicate.

At the same time, comparative literature identifies recurrent constraints. Dahlberg and Söderberg (2024), Matsiliza (2024), and Pearson (2024) show that state perceptions of chiefs, unclear statutory expectations, and limited autonomy can assign traditional leaders' responsibilities without corresponding powers or resources. Alexander (2018), Beall and Ngonyama (2009), and Ndoma (2021) further demonstrate how political instrumentalisation and partisan pressure can politicise customary roles and erode their legitimacy.

Across these contexts, hybrid arrangements have been shown to generate short-term gains in participation and project uptake, yet their longer-term sustainability remains contingent on institutional design that aligns authority with resources and protects customary actors from partisan capture. The comparative evidence therefore establishes both the potential value of hybrid interfaces and the structural conditions under which that value is realised or undermined.

Traditional Authorities, Devolution and Service Delivery in Post-2013 Zimbabwe

Within Zimbabwe, scholarship since the 2013 Constitution has focused primarily on the formal recognition of traditional leadership and the broader trajectory of devolution. Chigwata (2015, 2016), Moyo and Ncube (2014), and Nyikadzino and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022a, 2022b) provide legal and institutional analyses of decentralisation, constitutional devolution, and the continuing interaction between traditional and formal authorities. These studies, largely desk-based or reliant on national and provincial evidence, establish that devolution remains incomplete: central control and fiscal constraints limit local autonomy, legislative harmonisation is partial, and implementation depends on institutional capacity and political commitment (Bvirindi & Chikwawawa, 2022; Chakunda & Matenga, 2026; Chigumira et al., 2019; Zinyama et al., 2023).

Empirical work closer to community-level governance has examined traditional leaders' contributions in specific sectors and localities. Musarandega et al. (2018) document traditional mobilisation in climate adaptation, while Ndlovu and van der Walldt (2025) demonstrate the importance of traditional leaders and community structures in participatory rural planning. Dziva (2020) identifies opportunities for customary leadership in rural pandemic response, whereas Sibanda (1990) documents longstanding coordination problems between traditional and elected structures in communal land-use planning. These studies confirm that traditional leaders remain active agents in rural governance and that their cultural legitimacy can support short-term participation and project uptake. However, much of this research operates at provincial or district scale, relies on secondary or sector-specific evidence, or treats traditional contributions as episodic inputs rather than as elements of an ongoing hybrid administrative interface.

The Unresolved Issue: Ward-Level Stakeholder Perceptions of Hybrid Coordination

Despite the advances outlined above, a precise empirical gap remains. Existing Zimbabwean studies have established the constitutional recognition of traditional leadership, the incomplete character of fiscal and legislative devolution, and the continued practical involvement of traditional authorities in selected service domains. Comparative African research has further demonstrated both the mobilisation value of customary authority and the structural risks of mandate ambiguity and political capture. What has not been systematically examined is how the hybrid interface is experienced and evaluated by the full range of local stakeholders: chiefs, headmen, village heads, councillors, Rural District Council officials, extension officers, and community members at the ward level, where coordination must occur.

Limited primary qualitative evidence exists on how these actors understand the everyday legitimacy of traditional authority, the practical contributions of customary leaders across health, education, and water infrastructure, the frictions arising from overlapping mandates and partisan pressure, and the institutional arrangements they identify as necessary for more coherent collaboration. National- and provincial-level analyses (Chakunda & Matenga, 2026; Chigwata, 2016; Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022a, 2022b) necessarily abstract from these micro-dynamics. Sector-specific studies (Dziva, 2020; Musarandega et al., 2018) capture important contributions but rarely situate them within a sustained analysis of the inter-institutional interface. Consequently, policy debates on devolution and hybrid governance in Zimbabwe proceed with relatively limited evidence of how post-2013 arrangement's function or fail to function in the everyday administration of rural public services. This study addresses this gap by examining stakeholder perceptions of hybrid governance in Wards 25-30 of Masvingo South. It focuses specifically on the interaction of traditional authorities with councillors and rural district structures in the delivery of health, education, and water services, and on the implications of those interactions for institutional accountability and sustainable service provision. In doing so, it connects constitutional design with lived administrative practice and provides ward-level evidence that existing scholarships have left underdeveloped.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews to generate rich, contextual accounts of stakeholder perceptions of hybrid governance in rural service delivery. Fieldwork was conducted between January and March 2026 in Wards 25-30 of Masvingo South, within Chief Nyajena's constituency. The

design, sampling, data collection, and analytical procedures are reported below in sufficient detail to support methodological auditability while recognising the context-dependent character of interpretivist inquiry.

Research Paradigm and Design

An interpretivist paradigm was adopted. Hybrid governance in post-2013 rural Zimbabwe is understood as an ongoing process of negotiation shaped by cultural norms, power dynamics, and historical legacies rather than as a set of static, measurable outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This stance aligns with hybrid governance theory's emphasis on dynamic interaction rather than hierarchical opposition (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022a, 2022b) and is appropriate for exploring legitimacy, collaborative tension, and service outcomes as perceived by the actors involved. A qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2018) was selected to permit in-depth examination of traditional authorities' hybrid roles within the bounded system of Wards 25-30. The design supports thick description of stakeholder perceptions and the capture of service-delivery nuances that quantitative methods may miss. An embedded approach incorporating multiple stakeholder subgroups was used to enable analytical depth and the possibility of analytical generalisation to similar rural Zimbabwean contexts.

Population, Sampling and Participant Profile

The study population comprised stakeholders actively involved in decentralised governance and rural service delivery in Wards 25-30: traditional leaders, elected representatives, administrative officials, extension workers, and ordinary community members. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants with first-hand experience of devolution processes relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). Diversity of age, gender, and institutional role was deliberately sought.

A total of 38 participants were interviewed. The composition of the sample is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Profile (N = 38)

STAKEHOLDER CATEGORY	N	WARDS REPRESENTED	GENDER (M/F)
Chiefs	2	Cross-ward	2 / 0
Headmen	6	One per ward (25–30)	5 / 1
Village heads	7	Across wards 25–30	5 / 2
Councillors	4	Wards 25, 27, 28, 30	3 / 1
RDC officials	6	District level	4 / 2
Extension officers	3	Wards 25, 28, 30	1 / 2
Community members	10	Two per ward (approx.)	5 / 5

Source: Compiled by the author from the study's semi-structured interview data.

Note: N = number of participants; M = male; F = female; RDC = Rural District Council; approx. = approximately.

Sample size was determined by data saturation rather than by a pre-set numerical target. Following Guest et al. (2006) and Creswell and Poth (2018), saturation was judged to have been reached when successive interviews yielded no substantively new codes or themes. Thematic redundancy was first observed between interviews 32 and 35; interview 36 confirmed that major categories were well developed and that additional interviews were not generating new insight. The final sample of 38 was therefore retained as adequate for the depth and diversity required by an interpretivist case study focused on contextual understanding rather than statistical generalisation.

Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interview guides were prepared in English and translated into Shona. Translation accuracy was checked through back-translation by an independent bilingual speaker, after which minor adjustments were made for clarity and cultural appropriateness. The guide was pilot tested with three individuals outside the sample; feedback led to the rephrasing of two questions that had been interpreted inconsistently. Interviews were conducted in person by the researcher, who is fluent in both English and Shona. Sessions took place at community halls or other neutral venues selected to encourage openness and lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. Each interview began with rapport-building, confirmation of informed consent, and a brief explanation of the study purpose. Questions explored perceptions of hybrid roles, contributions to health, education, and water services, coordination challenges, and opportunities for improvement, with probes used to elicit concrete examples. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder. Where participants declined recording (four cases), contemporaneous written notes were taken and expanded immediately after the interview. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Shona-language interviews were first transcribed in Shona and then translated into English; the translations were subsequently reviewed by a second bilingual colleague for accuracy of meaning. Final transcripts were returned to a subset of participants for content verification where logistically feasible.

Several measures encouraged openness. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed; rapport-building and neutral, experience-focused questions reduced defensiveness (Patton, 2015). The researcher's fluency in Shona and Zimbabwean identity facilitated trust yet may have constrained disclosure on politically sensitive topics. When reluctance was evident (five cases), the researcher reaffirmed confidentiality and offered question-skipping options. Cross-stakeholder comparison of responses helped distinguish genuine perceptions from strategic framing (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Thematic analysis followed the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14. Coding combined inductive codes emerging from the data with deductive codes derived from the research questions and from hybrid-governance and institutional-legitimacy concepts. Primary coding was conducted by the researcher. An initial codebook was developed after the first twelve transcripts and refined iteratively as coding progressed. To strengthen analytical verification, a second researcher, an independent academic colleague familiar with qualitative methods but not involved in data collection, independently coded a subset of six transcripts. Coding decisions were then compared, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, leading to minor adjustments in code definitions. Peer-debriefing sessions with the same colleague were held at three points during the analysis to test the emerging thematic structure and identify potential alternative interpretations.

Member checking was conducted by sharing concise thematic summaries with 12 participants representing the main stakeholder categories and inviting comments on whether the summaries adequately reflected their perspectives. Feedback confirmed the resonance of the major themes and prompted clarification of two sub-themes relating to maintenance responsibilities. Reflexive notes were maintained to document researcher positionality as a Zimbabwean academic with prior experience of rural governance research and to consider how this background might shape interpretation.

Six major thematic clusters were initially identified. These were subsequently consolidated into four broader analytical blocks for presentation to strengthen the cumulative argument and avoid excessive segmentation. The analysis does not claim complete reproducibility; as an interpretivist study grounded in a specific socio-political context, its transferability rests on the transparency of procedures and the richness of contextual description rather than on procedural replication.

Methodological Reflections on Observational Evidence

Interviews capture perceptions but cannot directly observe coordination practices. During fieldwork, informal observation of three community meetings and two project sites provided contextual grounding for interview accounts, revealing procedural bypassing consistent with participant descriptions (Yin, 2018). However, systematic observation was precluded by political sensitivity, resource limits, and observer effects that could alter behaviour (Patton, 2015). Future research should combine interviews with structured observation of joint planning sessions and service delivery activities to triangulate findings and assess discrepancies between stated and actual practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was central to the research process. All participants provided informed consent after receiving a clear verbal and written statement of the study purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Anonymity was protected using pseudonyms in all reporting; audio files and transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Cultural sensitivity was observed by securing prior permission from Chief Nyajena and the relevant ward headmen before community entry and by avoiding overtly political framing of questions. Potential harm was minimised through neutral language and the offer of debriefing support where emotional responses arose. These measures sought to uphold participant dignity and trust while recognising the political sensitivities associated with research on traditional authority and local governance in Zimbabwe.

Methodological Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The single-case focus on Wards 25--30 under one chieftaincy limits statistical generalisation. Although purposive sampling sought diversity in role, age, and gender, the modest sample cannot capture every local variation in hybrid practice. Because the study relies on interviews, the data reflects participants' perceptions rather than direct observation of coordination practices. The researcher's dual role as data collector and primary analyst may have introduced interpretive bias, although independent coding, peer debriefing, and member checking provided safeguards. The political sensitivity of some topics may also have encouraged cautious responses.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with 38 stakeholders in Wards 25-30 of Masvingo South Constituency under Chief Nyajena's jurisdiction. The analysis identified four major analytical blocks from participants' responses regarding traditional authorities' roles in decentralised public administration and rural service delivery following the 2013 constitutional reforms. These four analytical blocks emerged from the systematic consolidation of six initial thematic clusters identified during coding, with closely related themes merged to achieve analytical coherence. The blocks are organised according to the research questions that guided the inquiry and are presented with representative verbatim quotations to illustrate stakeholder perspectives. Participant quotations are reproduced verbatim; grammatical irregularities within quotations therefore reflect the original responses rather than the surrounding authorial prose.

The four analytical blocks are: (1) stakeholder perceptions of hybrid integration and the role of traditional authorities within decentralised public administration; (2) perceived contributions to sectoral service delivery, encompassing health, education, water, and infrastructure development; (3) challenges in collaboration with elected officials and RDC structures, including procedural bypassing, mandate ambiguity, and partisan dynamics; and (4) community perspectives on legitimacy, effectiveness, and service uptake, together with opportunities for strengthened hybrid governance. Each block begins with a clear analytical finding and presents evidence from multiple stakeholder categories to ensure balanced representation of perspectives.

Stakeholder Perceptions of Hybrid Integration and the Role of Traditional Authorities Within Decentralised Public Administration

The first analytical finding is that traditional authorities were widely perceived as essential bridging actors who connect customary legitimacy with formal administrative frameworks, yet this integration was characterised by persistent jurisdictional ambiguity that created operational friction and undermined collaborative efficiency. Participants described how traditional authorities were integrated within formal decentralised structures. Traditional leaders were consistently described as essential bridging actors who connect customary legitimacy with administrative frameworks. A chief articulated the unifying power of cultural authority: "When it comes to the ward's service projects, everyone needs to get together, but people listen more when it's the Chief's voice that they hear, because our traditions are strong." (62-Male-Chief). This perspective was reinforced by a headman who acknowledged progress while identifying persistent ambiguities: "There is progress, because as traditional leaders we are now present at the same meetings as the RDC officials and councillors, but no one is clear who has the final say in decision making when it comes to actual decisions." (48-Male-Headman).

A community member emphasised the accessibility that traditional leaders provide: "Ordinary people like us find the system of decentralised administration easy to relate to thanks to the traditional leaders, as otherwise the papers from Harare would not get to the ground." (35-Female-Community Member). However, an RDC official offered a more measured perspective, acknowledging contributions while noting operational challenges: "Traditional leaders do help connect us to the communities, but we end up working around each other rather than together because of this." (51-Male-RDC Official). Taken together, these accounts indicate that while traditional leaders are widely recognised as indispensable hybrid actors, unclear jurisdictional boundaries create operational friction that undermines collaborative efficiency.

Perceived Contributions to Health Service Delivery

Participants described traditional authorities' specific contributions to health services, including clinic construction, outreach programmes, and community mobilisation. A councillor described how traditional authority facilitated practical project implementation: "When money came for upgrading the clinic, our chief summons the whole ward and everyone comes and give labour; because of that coordination, we have a proper clinic, which is now working 24 hours." (55-Male-Councillor).

An extension officer emphasised the enforcement dimension of traditional leadership: "Traditional leaders are the ones who actually mobilise the local people to participate in various development programs, otherwise we as extension officers can't do it by ourselves, people will only come when the local leadership asks them." (41-Female-Extension Officer).

A community member provided a concrete example of health access improvements as perceived by community participants: "Young people were organised by my village head to take the elderly to the mobile clinic; now even grandparents who are not able to walk for long distances are taking regular check-ups." (29-Male-Community Member).

However, a headman identified sustainability concerns despite short-term successes: "Once we push the health projects we have, people cooperate and traditional leaders push them, but we have no budget of our own to keep the clinics going." (58-Male-Headman). These accounts indicate that traditional authorities effectively mobilise communities for health initiatives but face structural constraints related to resource allocation and long-term maintenance.

Perceived Contributions to Education Service Delivery

Participants also described traditional leaders' roles in education, including school construction, enrolment promotion, and maintenance activities. A chief described personal engagement in enrolment campaigns: "Our Chief went personally to some villages to urge parents to send their children to school, and

within months, the enrolment increased as it was considered the parent's duty and not the government's." (62-Male-Chief).

A headman highlighted ongoing monitoring functions: "Village heads visit the villages to ask about the reason for children not going to school and when parents receive a call from the village head, they attend, and there are now fewer children herding cattle instead of going to school." (52-Female-Headman). A councillor noted the financial dimension of traditional authority influence: "Even before, parents were not paying school development levies, but if the chief/headman called a meeting and explained the need, they were willing to pay it because they value the voice of the chief or headman even more than an official letter." (44-Male-Councillor). These accounts indicate that traditional leaders operate as both mobilisers and informal enforcers in education, while also suggesting that reliance on customary authority may substitute for more institutionalised accountability mechanisms.

Perceived Contributions to Water and Infrastructure Development

Participants described traditional authorities' roles in water projects, road development, and infrastructure maintenance, emphasising dispute resolution, indigenous knowledge application, and community ownership. A chief described mediation functions in borehole siting: "When the borehole sites were being selected, disputes between villages and over the land were being ironed out by the Chief who helped the RDC officials to decide carefully, so that the project could start." (58-Male-Chief). A headman highlighted the application of traditional ecological knowledge: "As we are the local leadership, we have the knowledge about the location of the streams that are used in the season and the place where the soil will hold water, we guided the extension officers to where to drill so that after the season the borehole would not get dry." (49-Male-Headman). A community member emphasised the ownership dimension: "When the location of the borehole is blessed by the headman and chief, they feel that it is the villages, and they take care of it; hence the pumps are still functioning years later." (39-Female-Community Member).

An RDC official acknowledged contributions while noting procedural constraints: "The person in charge of the land is the traditional leader who helps identify good land and quickly settle conflicts, but once that has been done the land allocation and funding release still have to pass through the council processes, which can take some time." (51-Male-RDC Official). These accounts indicate that traditional authorities contribute distinctive technical knowledge and cultural legitimacy to infrastructure projects, while formal approval mechanisms may delay implementation.

Challenges in Collaboration with Elected Officials and RDC Structures

The third analytical finding is that collaboration between traditional authorities, elected councillors, and RDC structures was perceived to be characterised by significant barriers, including procedural bypassing, mandate ambiguity, resource competition, and partisan political interference. These barriers were consistently described as generating confusion, frustration, and weakened accountability, with stakeholders across different categories offering varying interpretations of the sources and severity of these challenges.

Procedural Bypassing and Mandate Ambiguity

Participants documented procedural bypassing as a recurrent barrier to effective hybrid cooperation. An RDC official described how councillors sometimes circumvented traditional authority structures: "At times, councillors would directly approach the people with input without consulting the chief or headmen at all, leaving people with high level of confusion on who the project is being handled by." (61-Male-RDC Official). An extension officer expressed exclusion from decision-making: "We feel that they are not including traditional leaders in the decision-making process of the funding that is available for communities what they actually need the most." (36-Female-Extension Officer).

The experience of exclusion was not universal, however. A headman offered a more conciliatory perspective, indicating that collaboration was sometimes achieved despite structural ambiguities: "Yes, there

are times when councillors and headmen don't agree about who is going to be in charge of a meeting, but I have seen cases where we sit down and work it out because the law requires us to work together." (55-Male-Headman). This variation in reported experiences suggests that procedural bypassing and mandate ambiguity are not inevitable but rather depend on individual relationships, local leadership dynamics, and the specific contexts in which different projects operate.

Partisan Political Interference

A community member highlighted partisan dynamics as a significant barrier: "If councillors believe that the traditional leaders are from the opposite party, they view us as a competitor and not as a partner for service projects." (47-Male-Community Member). A chief expressed concern about electoral manipulation: "Some councillors try to orchestrate service projects around election time to help themselves and expect the chiefs to be publicly seen to support them; this puts us in a difficult position as we must serve the community as a whole, not one party." (59-Male-Chief). A councillor called for depoliticisation: "Rules have to be clear in the hybrid model that party politics should not be involved in the service delivery; chiefs and councillors have to focus on what is good for their people, the ones they are leading." (38-Male-Councillor).

An RDC official acknowledged the problem while suggesting oversight mechanisms: "Yes, political interference does occur, but with sufficient monitoring at provincial level, it can be minimised; the problem is ensuring that the project is finished and money is kept for maintenance and not the traditional leaders." (51-Male-RDC Official). Taken together, these accounts indicate that, despite constitutional provisions for collaboration, legislative ambiguity and partisan dynamics create friction that undermines the effectiveness of hybrid governance. The variation in stakeholder perspectives with traditional leaders and community members more likely to emphasise exclusion and partisan pressure, while some councillors and RDC officials stressed legal requirements for collaboration indicates that hybridity is perceived as a contested rather than consensual space.

Community Perspectives on Legitimacy, Effectiveness and Service Uptake, Together With Opportunities for Strengthened Hybrid Governance

The fourth analytical finding is that cultural legitimacy was consistently described as a significant enabler of community participation and service uptake, but participants across all categories identified a legitimacy–resource mismatch in which traditional authorities carried substantial mobilisation and maintenance responsibilities while lacking corresponding fiscal authority, formal decision rights, and material support. Participants also proposed several opportunities for strengthening hybrid governance through institutional design, capacity building, and clearer guidelines.

Community Perspectives on Legitimacy and Service Uptake

A recurring pattern concerned the relationship between cultural legitimacy and service uptake, with community members describing traditional endorsement as important for project ownership. A community member articulated the connection between legitimacy and uptake: "The services don't feel like they are ours until the chief or headman is involved; if not, it's like something that's been brought in from outside, we don't really take it seriously." (57-Male-Community Member). Another community member noted the differential response to projects with and without traditional involvement:

People respond in great numbers to the work when they are supported by traditional leaders, but not so much when the local leaders are not involved." (71-Female-Community Member). A younger community member acknowledged legitimacy's value while noting its limitations: "The headman's blessing helps to ensure that everyone is prepared to make a contribution to the labour, and even to small fees, but everyone knows if the council doesn't get the materials to the job at an appropriate time, the project still gets stuck." (45-Male-Community Member).

The Legitimacy–Resource Mismatch

A village head identified the legitimacy-resource mismatch that emerged as a central analytical finding: "People look up to the chief, and that facilitates uptake; sometimes we feel that the burden of maintenance is on the 'traditional leaders' and the real power and money are in the hands of the councillors." (62-Male-Village Head). A headman described the maintenance burden falling on traditional leaders: "Once the borehole or clinic is handed over, the maintenance is always necessarily done by us traditional leaders, when there is a problem, people still go to us, the council does not usually follow up this project because they are very far." (43-Female-Headman). These accounts indicate that cultural legitimacy supports community participation and ownership but is not matched by equivalent formal authority and resources. The perceived effectiveness of traditional authorities in mobilisation phases contrasts with their perceived vulnerability in maintenance phases, suggesting that hybrid arrangements are perceived as more robust in initiation than in sustainability.

Opportunities for Strengthened Hybrid Governance

Participants proposed several measures for strengthening hybrid governance, including institutional structures, capacity building, and clearer guidelines. A community member proposed formal joint committees: "Establishment of official ward committees with chiefs, headmen, councillors, and RDC staff would enable us to plan the service projects together right from the start of the project rather than responding to problems once they have arisen." (54-Female-Community Member). A village head emphasised capacity building: "If the traditional leaders were well trained on the mechanism of budgets and project proposals then they would contribute more meaningful instead of being pulled in at the last minute." (68-Male-Village Head).

A councillor highlighted the importance of transparent reporting: "It is the opportunity for regular joint review meetings where chiefs and councillors report back openly to communities that is the real opportunity where communities can see one united front, and they can trust the system more." (32-Female-Councillor). An RDC official cautioned against excessive bureaucracy while endorsing clearer guidelines: "I agree a joint meeting is a good idea, but we need to take care not to put in too many layers which slow things down; the best change would be clearer written guidelines on how the responsibilities are to be shared." (51-Male-RDC Official).

Overall, the responses indicate that hybrid governance requires deliberate institutional design rather than reliance on cultural legitimacy alone. Participants across all stakeholder categories converged on the need for greater legal clarity, formalised coordination mechanisms, and capacity support for traditional leaders, while also acknowledging the risk that excessive formalisation could introduce bureaucratic delays.

DISCUSSION

This study examined stakeholder perceptions of traditional authorities as hybrid actors within Zimbabwe's post-2013 decentralised public administration in Wards 25-30 of Masvingo South. The findings indicate that customary leaders convert cultural legitimacy into mobilisation, compliance, and a sense of project ownership, while simultaneously operating under conditions of mandate ambiguity, resource asymmetry, and partisan pressure.

Rather than restating thematic detail, this section interprets these patterns, situates them in relation to prior research, and identifies the conditions under which hybrid arrangements appear effective. The discussion proceeds through three interconnected thematic areas, each engaging systematically with relevant literatures to explain not only whether the present evidence confirms, extends, qualifies, or diverges from earlier work but also why such patterns emerge with reference to institutional setting, stakeholder composition, geographical context, and methodological design.

Cultural Legitimacy as a Conditional Governance Resource

Empirical accounts consistently portrayed traditional endorsement as decisive for community uptake: projects associated with chiefs or headmen were described as "ours", while purely administrative initiatives were more often regarded as external. This pattern supports institutional legitimacy frameworks that distinguish input legitimacy (cultural embeddedness) from output legitimacy (service results) and treat the two as mutually reinforcing (Logan, 2009; Ringson, 2020). It also aligns with hybrid-governance arguments that public authority in post-colonial settings is co-constituted rather than hierarchically imposed (Bagayoko et al., 2016; Motadi & Sikhwari, 2024).

The finding extends Nyikadzino and Vyas-Doorgapersad's (2022a) observation that decentralisation reforms can preserve central control and leave implementation gaps at local level by showing how the resulting bridging function operates through everyday negotiations of meaning and compliance. Nyikadzino and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022a) examined devolution implementation primarily through the lens of administrative structures and fiscal transfers, concluding that Zimbabwe's decentralisation remained largely performative. The present study contributes a complementary perspective by demonstrating that despite these structural deficiencies, customary authorities actively construct informal bridging mechanisms that partially compensate for formal implementation failures. However, this compensation is incomplete and contingent, as the data also reveal uncertainty about final decision rights and instances in which traditional leaders were engaged only after decisions had already been taken.

Comparing this finding with Logan's (2009) broader Afrobarometer-based analysis of popular attitudes towards traditional leadership across 18 African countries reveals both convergence and divergence. Logan (2009) found that citizens across the continent express substantial trust in traditional authorities, particularly in rural areas, and that this trust coexists with support for democratic institutions. The present study confirms this pattern of coexistence in the Zimbabwean context but extends Logan's argument by showing that trust and legitimacy do not automatically translate into effective governance outcomes. While Logan's (2009) analysis operated primarily at the level of attitudes, the present study provides behavioural evidence that cultural legitimacy facilitates mobilisation but does not guarantee sustained service delivery or protect traditional authorities from procedural exclusion.

The finding also diverges in important respects from Honig's (2019) research on hybrid governance in post-conflict settings, which emphasises the adaptive potential of customary institutions and their capacity to fill governance voids. Honig (2019) argued that hybrid arrangements can be intentionally designed to leverage complementarity between formal and informal systems. The present evidence, however, suggests that such complementarity is not automatically achieved. Participants across categories reported that traditional leaders were often engaged only after decisions had already been taken, indicating that hybridity in the Masvingo South context operates more as an unplanned and contested space than as a deliberately designed institutional arrangement. This divergence can be explained by differences in institutional setting: Honig's (2019) analysis drew heavily on post-conflict cases in which international actors actively sought to construct hybrid governance arrangements, whereas the Zimbabwean context involves a longer standing but less formally institutionalised coexistence shaped by post-2013 constitutional provisions that remain incompletely implemented.

Similarly, the finding qualifies Olowu and Wunsch's (2004) emphasis on clear institutional interfaces as a precondition for effective local governance in Africa. Olowu and Wunsch (2004) argued from a comparative perspective that decentralisation success depends on clearly defined roles, accountability mechanisms, and resource allocation. The present study confirms the importance of these factors but also reveals that even in their absence, traditional authorities continue to perform mobilisation functions. This suggests that Olowu and Wunsch's (2004) framework may understate the resilience of customary governance practices in the face of institutional ambiguity. At the same time, the data caution against treating cultural legitimacy as an inexhaustible resource; the limitations participants reported regarding decision rights and procedural inclusion indicate that cultural authority remains potent for mobilisation yet is vulnerable to procedural exclusion and instrumentalisation. This insight qualifies more optimistic readings of hybrid complementarity

(Honig, 2019) and aligns with Bagayoko et al.'s (2016) argument that hybrid governance in African contexts is often characterised by contestation rather than harmonisation.

The methodological design of the present study specifically its focus on stakeholder perceptions at ward level in a single chieftaincy area may explain why the evidence reveals these tensions more acutely than some previous studies that operated at broader levels of analysis. Studies such as Logan's (2009) drew on nationally representative survey data that can identify general patterns of trust but may not capture the everyday negotiations and frustrations that emerge when examining specific service delivery episodes. The qualitative, interview-based approach adopted here allows for a more granular understanding of how legitimacy functions in practice, revealing both its mobilisational power and its limitations.

Sectoral Contributions and the Limits of Mobilisation

Across health, education, and water, traditional leaders were credited with mobilisation of labour and attendance, informal enforcement of norms (for example, around school enrolment), and the transfer of ownership through cultural validation. Water-related accounts additionally highlighted the practical contribution of local ecological knowledge to borehole siting. These patterns are consistent with earlier Zimbabwean studies documenting traditional roles in rural health mobilisation (Dziva, 2020), community adaptation (Musarandega et al., 2018), indigenous environmental knowledge (Mavhura & Mushure, 2019), and customary water-conflict governance (Shoko, 2022).

A closer comparative examination reveals important nuances. Dziva's (2020) research on health mobilisation in rural Zimbabwe emphasised the role of traditional leaders in promoting clinic attendance and immunisation programmes, finding that community members were more responsive to messages delivered by chiefs than to those from government health workers alone. The present study confirms this finding but extends it by identifying the mechanisms through which such mobilisation operates specifically, the cultural validation of projects as "ours" rather than external. This extension is significant because it moves beyond documenting effectiveness to explaining the processes that generate compliance. The difference in explanatory focus can be attributed to methodological approach: Dziva (2020) employed a primarily quantitative survey design, whereas the present study's qualitative interviews allowed participants to articulate why traditional endorsement mattered to them.

Musarandega et al. (2018) examined community adaptation in Zimbabwe's communal areas, finding that traditional authorities played crucial roles in facilitating collective responses to environmental shocks. The present study similarly identifies traditional leaders as key actors in facilitating participation and ownership. However, the comparison also reveals a potential divergence: Musarandega et al. (2018) focused on adaptation to external shocks such as droughts, where the imperative for collective action may be more immediate and compelling. The present study examines routine service provision in health, education, and water, where the incentives for mobilisation may be less urgent and where maintenance challenges become more pronounced. This difference in sectoral focus may explain why the present study identifies a more pronounced temporal asymmetry between mobilisation and maintenance phases than Musarandega et al. (2018) reported.

The finding regarding local ecological knowledge in borehole siting confirms Mavhura and Mushure's (2019) emphasis on indigenous environmental knowledge as a resource for sustainable resource management. Mavhura and Mushure (2019) argued that formal technical assessments alone are insufficient for effective water infrastructure placement and that local knowledge of hydrological patterns, soil conditions, and community usage should be integrated. The present study provides empirical support for this argument while also revealing the limitations of such knowledge when not accompanied by formal authority or resources. Participants reported that traditional leaders' knowledge of appropriate borehole locations was valued but that final decisions often rested with technical officials who did not always incorporate this knowledge systematically. This pattern suggests that even where sectoral contributions are recognised, the integration of customary knowledge into formal decision-making remains incomplete.

The finding resonates with Shoko's (2022) research on customary water-conflict governance in Zimbabwe, which documented traditional institutions' effectiveness in mediating water-related disputes. Shoko (2022) argued that customary water governance operates through principles of reciprocity and communal responsibility that formal legal frameworks cannot easily replicate. The present study supports this argument by showing how traditional leaders mediate disputes over borehole access and water infrastructure maintenance. However, the data also reveal that participants perceived these mediation functions as increasingly strained when material resources for maintenance are absent. This extends Shoko's (2022) analysis by demonstrating that conflict resolution functions are themselves vulnerable to resource constraints, suggesting that customary governance in the water sector requires not only cultural legitimacy but also material backing.

Interpretation of these contributions must remain cautious. The evidence is perceptual rather than based on independent outcome measures; claims of improved clinic functioning or enrolment therefore reflect stakeholder assessments rather than verified service statistics. This perceptual basis is a methodological feature that distinguishes the present study from studies employing objective outcome measures, such as Bazaanah and Mothapo's (2024) quantitative assessment of rural water service sustainability in Ghana. Bazaanah and Mothapo (2024) used technical indicators of borehole functionality and maintenance compliance, finding that post-construction vulnerability was widespread even where initial implementation appeared successful. The present study's perceptual data align with these findings but cannot provide independent verification. The perceptual focus was, however, appropriate for the research aim of examining how stakeholders understand hybrid governance, and it offers insights into subjective legitimacy that objective measures would not capture.

Moreover, the same participants who praised short-term mobilisation frequently noted the subsequent transfer of maintenance burdens to traditional structures that lacked budgets or formal follow-up support. This temporal asymmetry effectiveness during initiation coupled with vulnerability during maintenance aligns with evidence on fiscal and implementation constraints in Zimbabwean devolution (Zinyama et al., 2023) and comparative findings on post-construction service vulnerability in other African rural settings (Bazaanah & Mothapo, 2024; Hutete & Sibanda, 2022). Hutete and Sibanda (2022) examined water infrastructure sustainability in Zimbabwe's communal areas, finding that borehole functionality rates declined substantially within two years of installation in the absence of community-based maintenance systems. The present study extends this finding by identifying the mechanisms through which maintenance burdens fall disproportionately on traditional authorities who lack the fiscal and technical resources to sustain them. This extension is enabled by the study's focus on stakeholder perceptions of the maintenance process, which provides insight into why sustainability challenges persist despite initial mobilisation success.

Zinyama et al. (2023) analysed fiscal constraints in Zimbabwean devolution, documenting the gap between constitutional provisions for local government autonomy and the actual resources transferred to local authorities. The present study confirms this fiscal gap and shows how it manifests at the ward level through the delegation of maintenance responsibilities to traditional structures. The comparison suggests that the fiscal constraints Zinyama et al. (2023) identified at the level of rural district councils are cascaded downward, with traditional leaders and communities absorbing costs that formal authorities cannot or will not bear. This cascading effect is not merely a consequence of resource scarcity but also reflects the absence of clear statutory responsibility for maintenance a mandate ambiguity that the present study identifies as a recurrent theme.

Structural Friction, Political Pressure and Contested Hybridity

Mandate overlap, procedural bypassing, and partisan pressure emerged as recurrent constraints. These findings corroborate earlier diagnoses of legislative and implementation tensions in Zimbabwean devolution (Bvirindi & Chikwawawa, 2022; Chigwata, 2016; Moyo & Ncube, 2014) and of the political instrumentalisation of customary authority (Alexander, 2018; Ndoma, 2021). The present study adds granularity by showing how these structural features are experienced as mixed signals to communities,

fractured accountability, and the selective instrumentalisation of customary authority around electoral cycles. A systematic comparison with Chigwata's (2016) analysis of Zimbabwe's devolution framework reveals both confirmation and extension. Chigwata (2016) examined the constitutional and legal provisions for devolution, concluding that the legislative framework created potential for collaboration between traditional and formal institutions but left many implementation details unresolved. The present study confirms this legislative ambiguity but extends Chigwata's (2016) analysis by showing how this ambiguity generates practical coordination failures at the ward level. While Chigwata (2016) operated primarily at the level of constitutional interpretation and legal analysis, the present study provides empirical evidence of how the unresolved details manifest in everyday interactions between traditional leaders and councillors. This extension is enabled by the methodological focus on stakeholder perceptions, which captures the experiential dimension of institutional ambiguity that legal analysis alone cannot reveal.

The finding also aligns with Bvirindi and Chikwawawa's (2022) research on local governance tensions in Zimbabwe's rural districts, which documented conflicts between traditional leaders and councillors over authority, resource allocation, and political allegiance. Bvirindi and Chikwawawa (2022) argued that these tensions reflect deeper structural contradictions between customary and democratic governance systems. The present study confirms this argument and provides additional evidence that these tensions are exacerbated by electoral cycles, during which partisan pressures intensify, and customary authority becomes selectively instrumentalised. This temporal dimension the intensification of tensions around electoral periods extends Bvirindi and Chikwawawa's (2022) analysis by specifying conditions under which structural frictions become more acute.

Moyo and Ncube's (2014) earlier analysis of local governance in Zimbabwe emphasised the dominance of partisan considerations in rural administration, arguing that political loyalty often outweighs professional competence or institutional roles in shaping governance outcomes. The present study corroborates this finding by documenting perceptions that councillors and RDC officials sometimes bypass traditional leaders when partisan calculations dictate different approaches. However, the present study also reveals that partisan pressure operates asymmetrically, affecting different actors differently. Some traditional leaders described pressure to align with ruling party positions, while councillors reported pressures to demonstrate party loyalty that sometimes conflicted with collaborative governance norms. This asymmetry extends Moyo and Ncube's (2014) analysis by showing that partisan pressures do not simply override institutional roles but interact with them in complex ways.

The finding regarding political instrumentalisation of customary authority resonates strongly with Alexander's (2018) historical analysis of traditional leadership in Zimbabwe. Alexander (2018) traced the transformation of chieftaincy from colonial administrative institutions through post-independence political incorporation to contemporary contested governance spaces, arguing that traditional authorities have consistently been subject to political manipulation. The present study confirms this historical trajectory and shows how it continues to shape contemporary governance practices. Participants described experiences in which traditional leaders were engaged or bypassed depending on political calculations, suggesting that Alexander's (2018) analysis of political instrumentalisation remains relevant to understanding hybrid governance in rural Zimbabwe. The present study extends Alexander's (2018) work by focusing specifically on the service delivery implications of political instrumentalisation, whereas Alexander's (2018) analysis concentrated primarily on political and institutional dynamics.

The finding also converges with Ndoma's (2021) research on the politicisation of traditional leadership in Zimbabwe's rural areas, which documented the co-optation of chiefs into partisan political structures. Ndoma (2021) argued that such co-optation undermines the legitimacy of traditional authorities and creates tensions with community expectations of impartiality. The present study confirms this argument by showing how partisan pressure generates mixed signals to communities, who may perceive traditional leaders as compromised when they appear to align with political actors. This perception of compromise, in turn, weakens the cultural legitimacy that enables mobilisation a finding that illuminates the connection between political instrumentalisation and the depletion of cultural authority.

Not all stakeholders interpreted these frictions identically. Some traditional leaders and community members emphasised exclusion and political pressure; certain councillors and RDC officials stressed the need to avoid additional bureaucratic layers and pointed to existing legal requirements for collaboration. Such disagreements indicate that hybridity is a contested rather than consensual space. This finding can be compared with Motadi and Sikhwari's (2024) analysis of stakeholder perspectives on hybrid governance in South Africa's rural municipalities. Motadi and Sikhwari (2024) found that perceptions of hybrid governance effectiveness varied significantly depending on stakeholder position, with traditional leaders more likely to emphasise their contributions and local government officials more likely to highlight bureaucratic constraints. The present study reveals similar positional variation, suggesting that contested perceptions may be a general feature of hybrid governance arrangements. This positional variation can be explained by different stakeholder interests and institutional locations: traditional leaders experience exclusion directly, while councillors and RDC officials experience the constraints of administrative accountability and may view traditional leaders' claims as threatening their formal authority.

Alternative explanations for coordination failures resource scarcity, capacity deficits, or personal leadership styles cannot be ruled out based on interview data alone. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that legislative ambiguity and partisan incentives systematically shape the terms of interaction, rendering cultural legitimacy a potentially depletable rather than stable asset when unprotected by clear rules and resource alignment. This interpretation is consistent with Bagayoko et al.'s (2016) framework of hybrid governance as an arena of negotiation and contestation rather than a settled institutional order. However, the present study extends Bagayoko et al.'s (2016) framework by showing that the depletion of cultural legitimacy through political instrumentalisation is not merely a theoretical possibility but an empirically observable process. The comparison with Bagayoko et al.'s (2016) analysis also reveals a geographical boundary condition: Bagayoko et al. (2016) drew primarily on West African cases where hybrid governance arrangements have been more extensively studied, whereas the present study applies and tests their framework in a Southern African context with its specific historical and political dynamics.

Mechanisms of Legitimacy Depletion

Cultural legitimacy erodes through two pathways. First, political instrumentalisation when traditional leaders are pressured to endorse partisan projects undermines community trust and perceived impartiality, weakening the authority that enables mobilisation (Alexander, 2018; Ndoma, 2021). Second, procedural exclusion bypassing customary actors in decision-making signals that their roles are ceremonial, reducing their perceived influence and thus their mobilisation capacity (Chigwata, 2016). This creates a negative feedback loop: exclusion reduces legitimacy, and diminished legitimacy invites further exclusion. Indicators for testing this depletion hypothesis include longitudinal measures of community trust and participation patterns across electoral cycles. Legitimacy may be restored through inclusive procedures and safeguards against partisan capture (Bagayoko et al., 2016).

Implications for State Capacity and Hybrid Governance

The findings confirm that formal state capacity in rural Zimbabwe is limited; RDCs lack resources and reach to deliver services independently. Hybrid arrangements partially compensate by leveraging customary legitimacy for mobilisation, but they cannot substitute for formal authority in maintenance phases requiring sustained resources (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). This resonates with Reno's (1995) "shadow state" concept, yet hybrid governance proves conditional and unstable effective for initiation, vulnerable for sustainability. Strengthening hybrid governance requires addressing underlying state capacity deficits and protecting customary authority from political manipulation (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022a).

Gender Dimensions of Hybrid Governance

Traditional leadership structures remain predominantly male (only one female headman and two female village heads in this study). Female participants reported less influence over project decisions and greater labour burdens without corresponding authority. Hybrid arrangements may reinforce gender inequalities by

privileging male authority (Ringson, 2020). Gender-responsive reforms should ensure women's representation in joint planning, include gender-sensitive service delivery, and support women's leadership development (Matsiliza, 2024). Future research should systematically examine gender differences in perceptions and outcomes.

Implications, Transferability and Limitations

Theoretically, the study supports a view of hybrid governance as a negotiated interface whose performance depends on the simultaneous presence of cultural legitimacy, legal clarity, and resource alignment. When any of these is weak, short-term mobilisation gains become difficult to sustain. This formulation refines hybrid-governance and institutional-legitimacy perspectives by specifying micro-level conditions rather than assuming automatic complementarity. The study contributes to hybrid-governance theory by introducing the distinction between mobilisation-phase and maintenance-phase effectiveness, suggesting that hybrid arrangements may be more appropriate for some aspects of service delivery than others. This phase-dependent effectiveness has implications for how hybrid governance is theorised: rather than treating hybridity as a static institutional configuration, the analysis suggests that the value and vulnerability of hybrid arrangements vary over the service delivery cycle.

The finding that cultural legitimacy can be depleted through political instrumentalisation and procedural exclusion also contributes to institutional legitimacy theory. While legitimacy has typically been treated as a relatively stable resource that accumulates over time (Logan, 2009; Ringson, 2020), the present study suggests that cultural legitimacy in the context of service delivery is conditional and potentially depletable. This insight extends institutional legitimacy frameworks by introducing a temporal and relational dimension: legitimacy is not simply an attribute of institutions but is produced and reproduced through everyday interactions, and it can be eroded when interactions are characterised by exclusion, instrumentalisation, or resource asymmetry.

Policy implications include legislative harmonisation, formalised joint planning at ward level, capacity support for traditional leaders in administrative processes, and safeguards against the partisan use of customary authority. These suggestions converge with recommendations on local-government capacity, devolution implementation, and participatory rural planning (Afrobarometer, 2021; Chatiza & Makanza, 2017; Chigumira et al., 2019; Ndlovu & van der Walddt, 2025) but gain specificity from stakeholder accounts of everyday practice. Chatiza and Makanza (2017) proposed a framework for participatory rural planning in Zimbabwe that emphasised the integration of traditional leadership into formal development processes. The present study supports this framework while adding the qualification that formal integration must be accompanied by clear role definitions and resource allocation, as mere inclusion without authority or resources may generate additional expectations without corresponding capacities.

Ndlovu and van der Walddt's (2025) recent analysis of local government capacity in Zimbabwe argued that devolution success depends on strengthening both formal institutions and the enabling environment within which they operate. The present study supports this argument and specifies what "enabling environment" means for hybrid governance: legal clarity regarding traditional leaders' roles, fiscal resources to support their engagement in service delivery, safeguards against political instrumentalisation, and mechanisms for accountable coordination. These specifications are enabled by the study's empirical focus on everyday practice, which reveals the concrete challenges that stakeholders face and the practical adjustments they make. The policy implications also resonate with Afrobarometer's (2021) finding that Zimbabweans express strong support for traditional leadership involvement in local governance but also demand accountability and transparency. The present study suggests that meeting these dual expectations requires institutional mechanisms that enhance traditional leaders' legitimacy while also ensuring their accountability. This is not a simple trade-off but a complex balancing act that requires careful institutional design.

Transferability is necessarily limited. The findings derive from a single chieftaincy area in Masvingo South and rest on perceptual data. They may be relevant to other Zimbabwean communal settings with similar institutional architectures, yet differences in local political economies, leadership quality, and resource

environments caution against broad generalisation across Africa. The study's geographical focus on a specific region of Zimbabwe Masvingo South's communal areas represents a boundary condition that shapes the findings. Other regions of Zimbabwe with different histories of land tenure, colonial administration, or political contestation may exhibit different patterns of hybrid governance. Moreover, the study's focus on a single chieftaincy area means that the findings may not capture the full diversity of hybrid governance arrangements across Zimbabwe's communal areas.

The methodological design also shapes transferability. The reliance on stakeholder perceptions rather than objective outcome measures means that the findings reflect how governance processes are experienced and interpreted rather than providing independent verification of effectiveness. This perceptual focus is appropriate for understanding legitimacy and accountability, which are inherently subjective, but it limits the study's ability to assess actual service delivery outcomes. Future research combining perceptual measures with objective indicators would strengthen the evidence base. Differences in local political economies represent an important boundary condition. The study was conducted in an area predominantly characterised by communal farming, with relatively low levels of economic diversification and significant reliance on remittances and state transfers. Areas with different economic profiles such as mining or peri-urban regions may exhibit different patterns of hybrid governance, as economic resources may shape both the stakes of governance and the availability of alternative sources of authority and accountability.

Leadership quality also represents a potentially significant boundary condition. The study captured stakeholder perceptions of traditional leaders in the specific wards examined, but different chieftaincy areas may have traditional leaders with varying personal qualities, commitment, and capacity. The extent to which cultural legitimacy translates into effective mobilisation may depend on individual leadership attributes, which the study did not systematically control for.

These limitations notwithstanding, the findings offer grounded evidence that traditional authorities remain consequential actors in post-2013 rural administration, while underscoring that their contributions are contingent on institutional design rather than guaranteed by cultural authority alone. This contingency argument represents an important qualification to both overly optimistic readings of hybrid governance (Honig, 2019) and overly pessimistic dismissals of customary authority (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). The study suggests that hybrid governance in rural Zimbabwe is neither a panacea nor a failure but rather a negotiated and contested space whose effectiveness depends on the specific configurations of legitimacy, legal clarity, and resource alignment that characterise settings and particular phases of service delivery.

Future comparative and longitudinal research would be required to test whether formalised interfaces reduce friction and improve maintenance outcomes. Comparative research across different chieftaincy areas within Zimbabwe, as well as across countries with different devolution frameworks, would allow for more systematic testing of the conditions under which hybrid governance arrangements are effective. Longitudinal research tracking service delivery outcomes over time would enable assessment of the sustainability of hybrid arrangements and the extent to which mobilisation gains are maintained or lost in the maintenance phase. Such research would also allow for more definitive testing of the depletion hypothesis the proposition that cultural legitimacy erodes when traditional leaders are subjected to persistent political instrumentalisation and procedural exclusion. Within these bounds, the study offers an empirically grounded contribution to understanding hybrid governance in rural public administration, with implications for theory, policy, and future research in Zimbabwe and other settings where customary and formal governance systems coexist.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine how traditional authorities interact with councillors and rural district structures in supporting health, education, water, and infrastructure services in Wards 25-30 of Masvingo South, and to analyse the implications of those interactions for institutional accountability and rural service delivery. The aim was pursued through an interpretivist single-case design employing semi-structured interviews with 38 purposively selected stakeholders, thematic analysis supported by NVivo 14, member checking, and peer

debriefing. The resulting evidence permits a grounded account of hybrid governance as it is practised and perceived at ward level following the 2013 constitutional reforms.

Summary of Principal Findings

The principal findings can be summarised in relation to the four research questions that guided the inquiry. First, stakeholders consistently perceived traditional authorities as hybrid actors who translate formal decentralisation into locally intelligible practice. Chiefs, headmen, and village heads were described as rendering administrative processes legible and as converting cultural legitimacy into community mobilisation and a sense of project ownership. This perception was remarkably consistent across stakeholder categories, suggesting that traditional authorities occupy a distinctive and widely recognised position within the governance architecture that formal administrative structures alone cannot replicate.

Second, traditional leaders were credited with concrete contributions across the three service domains examined: mobilisation of labour and attendance in health, personal persuasion and monitoring in education, and the combination of dispute mediation and local ecological knowledge in water infrastructure. These contributions were widely regarded as enabling short-term project initiation and uptake. The evidence indicates that traditional authorities' effectiveness in these domains derives substantially from their cultural embeddedness and the legitimacy this confers, which enables them to mobilise community members in ways that purely administrative actors cannot readily achieve.

Third, collaboration with councillors and Rural District Council structures was characterised by mandate ambiguity, procedural bypassing, competition over authority, and partisan pressure. These frictions produced mixed signals to communities, delayed coordination, and the selective instrumentalisation of customary authority. The persistence of these barriers despite constitutional provisions for collaboration indicates that legal recognition alone is insufficient to ensure effective hybrid governance; institutional design must also address the practical mechanisms through which collaboration is implemented at ward level.

Fourth, stakeholders identified clearer role definitions, formal joint planning mechanisms at ward level, capacity support in administrative and financial processes, and protection of service delivery from partisan interference as necessary conditions for more durable hybrid arrangements. These proposed measures reflect stakeholders' understanding that hybrid governance requires deliberate institutional design rather than reliance on cultural legitimacy alone, and that the sustainability of hybrid arrangements depends on addressing the structural deficiencies that currently undermine their effectiveness.

Theoretical Contribution

The study's specific theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating that hybrid governance in this setting operates as a negotiated administrative interface rather than as a stable institutional settlement. Cultural legitimacy functions as a conditional governance resource: it enables mobilisation and ownership, yet remains vulnerable to procedural exclusion, resource asymmetry, and political capture. This conditional character of cultural legitimacy has not been sufficiently emphasised in the hybrid governance literature, which has tended to treat legitimacy as a relatively stable attribute of institutions rather than as a resource that can be depleted through exclusion, instrumentalisation, and resource asymmetry.

The evidence further reveals a temporal asymmetry in hybrid performance relative effectiveness in the initiation and mobilisation phases of projects, coupled with pronounced vulnerability in the maintenance and sustainability phases. This pattern underscores that legitimacy and resource alignment are mutually dependent; neither is sufficient in isolation. The mobilisation phase benefits from cultural legitimacy and the ability to generate collective enthusiasm, while the maintenance phase requires ongoing resource commitment, technical capacity, and accountable institutional structures that customary actors alone may not possess. This phase-dependent effectiveness has not been systematically theorised in the hybrid-governance

literature, which has generally treated hybrid arrangements as relatively stable configurations rather than as arrangements whose value and vulnerability vary over the service delivery cycle.

These insights refine understanding of the micro-conditions under which customary and formal authorities produce coherent coordination or persistent friction, and they do so based on ward-level stakeholder perceptions rather than national-level institutional analysis alone. By specifying these micro-conditions, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of hybrid governance that moves beyond general assertions of complementarity or incompatibility to identify the specific institutional, resource, and political factors that shape hybrid effectiveness in particular settings and phases.

Policy Implications

The practical implications follow directly from the deficiencies identified in the analysis. The recurring confusion over decision rights and the practice of engaging traditional leaders only after key decisions have been taken point to the need for clearer statutory demarcation of fiscal, administrative, and accountability functions between traditional authorities and Rural District Council structures. Such demarcation would reduce the jurisdictional ambiguity that currently generates operational friction and would provide traditional leaders with greater clarity regarding their formal roles and responsibilities. However, this recommendation must be understood as arising from the specific institutional configuration observed in the study area rather than as a universally applicable prescription, and its implementation would require careful adaptation to local conditions and consultation with affected stakeholders.

The pattern of procedural bypassing and last-minute inclusion supports the establishment of formal joint planning mechanisms at ward level so that coordination begins at project inception rather than after problems have already arisen. These mechanisms could take the form of regular joint meetings, formalised consultation procedures, and documented planning processes that explicitly include traditional authorities alongside councillors and RDC officials. Such mechanisms would address the perception expressed by multiple participants that traditional leaders are often engaged only reactively, after decisions have already been made, and would enable traditional authorities to contribute their distinctive knowledge and legitimacy from the outset of project planning. The evidence suggests that this change alone could substantially reduce the confusion and frustration that currently characterise inter-institutional coordination.

The observation that traditional leaders absorb substantial mobilisation and maintenance responsibilities without corresponding budgets or technical preparation indicates the value of targeted capacity support in budgeting, project design, and monitoring. Such support would enable traditional authorities to participate more meaningfully in formal planning processes and would reduce the sustainability gaps that currently undermine the long-term effectiveness of hybrid arrangements. This recommendation does not imply that traditional leaders should be converted into administrative officials; rather, it suggests that providing them with basic administrative competencies would enhance their effectiveness within existing hybrid arrangements without displacing the cultural legitimacy that underpins their mobilisation functions. The scope of such capacity support should be proportionate to the roles that traditional authorities play and to the resources realistically available, avoiding the creation of expectations that cannot be met.

The documented pressure on traditional leaders to provide public endorsement for partisan projects underscores the importance of explicit safeguards that insulate routine service delivery from electoral instrumentalisation. Such safeguards could include provisions for non-partisan service delivery in the relevant legislation, monitoring mechanisms to detect and address partisan interference, and institutional protections for traditional leaders who resist partisan pressure. However, these safeguards must be implemented in ways that acknowledge the existing political dynamics within which hybrid governance operates; the evidence suggests that partisan interference is a recurrent feature of the governance landscape rather than an aberration, and policy responses must therefore address the underlying incentives that generate such interference rather than simply declaring it unacceptable.

These measures are offered as responses to observed institutional weaknesses rather than as guaranteed

solutions. Their feasibility and effectiveness would depend on the specific local conditions, political dynamics, and resource environments within which they would be implemented. The study's single-case design limits the generalisability of these implications, and they should therefore be understood as context-sensitive possibilities arising from the specific institutional problems documented in the study area rather than as nationally generalisable prescriptions. Policymakers and practitioners should interpret these implications as starting points for contextualised adaptation rather than as finished templates for implementation.

Designing Capacity-Building for Traditional Leaders

Targeted capacity-building should develop competencies in participatory budgeting, project design, basic monitoring, and financial reporting (Ndlovu & van der Walddt, 2025). Effective formats include participatory workshops, mentoring with RDC staff, and peer-learning networks across chieftaincies (Chatiza & Makanza, 2017). Programmes should be phased over 12–24 months, with safeguards against partisan co-optation-explicit non-partisanship requirements, independent monitoring, and institutional protections for leaders resisting pressure (Moyo & Ncube, 2014). Content must be adapted to local contexts and evaluated regularly.

Design Principles for Ward-Level Joint Planning

Formal joint planning mechanisms should include: (1) quarterly meetings with traditional leaders, councillors, RDC officials, extension officers, and community representatives; (2) transparent decision-making protocols avoiding excessive bureaucracy; (3) documented engagement from project inception, not after decisions; (4) linkages to district planning; and (5) non-partisanship safeguards such as rotating chairs and independent monitoring (Chigumira et al., 2019). These principles address procedural bypassing and enable customary actors to contribute their knowledge and legitimacy from the outset, reducing coordination failures (Bvirindi & Chikwawawa, 2022).

LIMITATIONS

The study's limitations must be acknowledged explicitly. The findings derive from a single chieftaincy area in Masvingo South and rest on perceptual data gathered through semi-structured interviews. The reliance on stakeholder perceptions means that the findings reflect how governance processes are experienced and interpreted rather than providing independent verification of effectiveness. Claims regarding improved clinic functioning, increased enrolment, or sustained borehole functionality should therefore be understood as participant-reported perceptions rather than independently verified outcome data. This perceptual focus is appropriate for understanding legitimacy and accountability, which are inherently subjective, but it limits the study's ability to assess actual service delivery outcomes.

The transferability of the findings is necessarily limited by the single-case design and the specific institutional and geographical context of the study. The findings may be relevant to other Zimbabwean communal settings with similar institutional architectures, yet differences in local political economies, leadership quality, and resource environments caution against broad generalisation across Africa or even across different regions of Zimbabwe. The study's geographical focus on a specific region of Zimbabwe Masvingo South's communal areas represents a boundary condition that shapes the findings, and other regions with different histories of land tenure, colonial administration, or political contestation may exhibit different patterns of hybrid governance.

Differences in local political economies represent an important boundary condition. The study was conducted in an area predominantly characterised by communal farming, with relatively low levels of economic diversification and significant reliance on remittances and state transfers. Areas with different economic profiles such as mining or peri-urban regions may exhibit different patterns of hybrid governance, as economic resources may shape both the stakes of governance and the availability of alternative sources of authority and accountability. The nature and extent of traditional authority itself, including the personal

qualities, commitment, and capacity of individual traditional leaders, may also vary significantly across different chieftaincy areas and could influence the findings in ways that the study design could not control for.

The methodological design also shapes the findings. The reliance on qualitative interview data, while appropriate for capturing stakeholder perceptions, means that the study cannot systematically test causal relationships or quantify the relative importance of different factors shaping hybrid governance. The study also did not include direct observation of governance processes or analysis of documentary evidence, which would have provided additional perspectives on the dynamics examined. These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted as generating hypotheses and insights for further investigation rather than as providing definitive conclusions about hybrid governance in rural Zimbabwe.

Avenues for Future Research

Future comparative and longitudinal research would be required to test whether formalised interfaces reduce friction and improve maintenance outcomes. Comparative research across different chieftaincy areas within Zimbabwe, as well as across countries with different devolution frameworks, would allow for more systematic testing of the conditions under which hybrid governance arrangements are effective. Such comparative research would enable researchers to distinguish between factors that are specific to the Masvingo South context and those that are more broadly relevant to hybrid governance in settings where customary and formal governance systems coexist.

Longitudinal research tracking service delivery outcomes over time would enable assessment of the sustainability of hybrid arrangements and the extent to which mobilisation gains are maintained or lost in the maintenance phase. Such research would also allow for more definitive testing of the depletion hypothesis the proposition that cultural legitimacy erodes when traditional leaders are subjected to persistent political instrumentalisation and procedural exclusion. Longitudinal designs would enable researchers to observe changes in governance patterns over time and to identify the factors that contribute to sustainability or decline, providing evidence that cross-sectional studies cannot generate.

Research combining perceptual measures with objective indicators of service delivery outcomes would strengthen the evidence base and enable more robust assessments of hybrid governance effectiveness. Such research could examine whether the mobilisation functions that participants attribute to traditional authorities translate into measurable improvements in service delivery outcomes, and whether the maintenance challenges that participants identify are reflected in objective indicators of infrastructure functionality. Mixed methods design that combine qualitative exploration of stakeholder perceptions with quantitative measurement of outcomes would provide a more comprehensive understanding of hybrid governance dynamics.

Further research examining the mechanisms through which political instrumentalisation affects cultural legitimacy would also be valuable. The evidence suggests that partisan pressure depletes the legitimacy that enables mobilisation, but the specific mechanisms through which this depletion occurs are not fully understood. Research examining how communities perceive traditional leaders who are perceived to be aligned with political parties would illuminate the relationship between political instrumentalisation and legitimacy depletion and would inform the development of safeguards against partisan interference.

Finally, intervention research testing specific policy measures would provide evidence on the effectiveness of different approaches to strengthening hybrid governance. Such research could examine whether formal joint planning mechanisms, capacity building programmes, or legislative reforms improve coordination and service delivery outcomes and could identify the conditions under which different interventions are most effective. These research avenues would build on the foundation established by the present study and would contribute to a more robust evidence base for policy and practice in hybrid governance settings.

Concluding Reflection

Within these bounds, the study offers a grounded empirical contribution to understanding hybrid governance in rural public administration, with implications for theory, policy, and future research in Zimbabwe and other settings where customary and formal governance systems coexist. The study demonstrates that traditional authorities remain consequential actors in post-2013 rural administration, while underscoring that their contributions are contingent on institutional design rather than guaranteed by cultural authority alone. This contingency argument represents an important qualification to both overly optimistic readings of hybrid governance that assume automatic complementarity and overly pessimistic dismissals of customary authority that overlook its mobilisational potential. The study suggests that hybrid governance in rural Zimbabwe is neither a panacea nor a failure but rather a negotiated and contested space whose effectiveness depends on the specific configurations of legitimacy, legal clarity, and resource alignment that characterise settings and particular phases of service delivery. This nuanced understanding provides a basis for more informed policy and practice while also identifying directions for further research that can refine and extend the insights generated by this study.

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