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Towards Enhancing Diversity in Junior/Youth Councils for Sustainable Youth Participation in Local Governance Processes: A Case of Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

Several local authorities in Zimbabwe have established Junior Councils (JCs) to promote the involvement and participation of youth in local governance processes and provide a structured environment for youth to develop leadership skills and understand democratic processes. However, for these JCs to be effective in their representative role, their composition should be premised on diversity, ensuring equitable access for all young people. Since their establishment in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s, few systematic studies have assessed diversity in JCs. Based on a qualitative research approach, this article, therefore, assesses the current JCs to understand the extent to which they comply with the fundamental principle of diversity and proffer recommendations to address the identified gaps. The study revealed a concerning gap. It found that although several Zimbabwean local authorities have established JCs, diversity is not adequately prioritised. Youths, particularly those who are not academically gifted, those from low-income and hard-to-reach areas and children with disabilities are consistently underrepresented. Additionally, the article also found that the recruitment and selection methods used in Zimbabwe perpetuate the marginalisation of some segments of the youth. To address the preceding gaps and foster diversity, the study recommends that the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works, the National Junior Council Association (NJCA) and local authorities should refine the existing JCs manual and guidelines to include a dedicated diversity framework.

Keywords:

Junior Council, Diversity, Participation, Local Governance, Zimbabwe.

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Introduction

Countries worldwide have established junior or youth councils to enhance the involvement and participation of young people in local governance processes (Munyede, Mazambani & Maja, 2021; Meda & Koshuma, 2012). Youth participation is widely recognised as a fundamental pillar for effective local governance (Augsberger, Collins & Gecker, 2017; Collis et al., 2017: Collins, Augsberger & Gecker, 2018; Pyakurel, 2023; Augsberger, 2018). Evidence shows that the engagement gap among youth is widening in Africa (Makulilo, 2022; Phaswana, 2016), with several detrimental effects particularly impacting those from low-income families and marginalised communities (Munyede, Mazambani & Maja, 2021; Augsberger et al., 2017). Junior or youth councils, therefore, serve as important platforms for youth participation in governance processes and decision-making. Youth involvement in local governance is advantageous for both local governments and the youth. Literature demonstrates that such participation grants young people a sense of control over local policy processes (Augsberger et al., 2017; Meda & Koshuma, 2012), empowers them with governance and leadership skills (Makulilo, 2022), and aids their understanding of local government structures and their roles in community development (Augsberger, Collins & Gecker, 2017). These benefits cultivate governance-conscious young people who engage in policy processes at local, regional, national, and even international levels. Scholarly literature also indicates that youth participation benefits local governments and communities, as young people bring fresh ideas alongside innovative and entrepreneurial solutions (Munyede, Mazambani & Maja, 2021; Pyakurel, 2023; Augsberger et al., 2017).

There are global, regional, national, and local commitments to promote youth participation in governance processes through the establishment of junior and youth councils. For instance, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, Agenda 2063 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child recognise and protect children's right to participate in governance processes (African Union Commission, 2006, 2015; Munyede, Mazambani & Maja, 2021; Meda & Koshuma, 2012). These conventions emphasise the need to ensure the equal participation and representation of youths and children from different social, cultural and economic backgrounds. Agenda 2063 Aspiration 48 underscores the active involvement of all citizens in all aspects of Development (African Union Commission, 2015). JCs have emerged as a useful platform to institutionalise youth participation in local government in Africa (Meda & Koshuma, 2012; Makulilo, 2022; Phaswana, 2016).

Several local authorities in Zimbabwe, in line with global and regional trends, have established JCs to promote the involvement and participation of youth in local governance policy processes and provide learning platforms for youths to develop leadership skills (Munyede, Mazambani & Maja, 2021). There is consensus that for JCs to foster democratic local governance effectively, they should be diverse and

represent young people from different backgrounds. Yet, studies and information on diversity in JCs remain limited. Since their establishment in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s, few systematic studies have assessed diversity in JCs; thus, the focus of this study. This study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on youth participation in local governance by examining the extent and nature of diversity within Junior Councils (JCs) in Zimbabwe. While JCs are promoted as platforms for youth inclusion, little attention has been given to how representative they are of the broader youth population, particularly in terms of gender, socioeconomic background, disability status, and geography. The study seeks to uncover whether JCs reflect the diverse composition of Zimbabwean youth or if certain groups remain underrepresented. By identifying challenges and opportunities for inclusive participation, the research offers insights into strengthening the representational capacity of JCs. Ultimately, it supports efforts to deepen democratic governance by ensuring that youth councils function as equitable spaces where all young people, especially those from marginalised communities, can engage in decision-making and develop active citizenship.

Literature Review

An Overview of Junior Councils

JCs, also known as youth councils (Collins, Augsberger & Gecker, 2018), are widely defined in literature. The NJCA (2014:6) defines a junior council in general terms as “a form of local government led by minors or children.” Although this definition captures the nature and scope of JCs, it does not specify the age groups involved. The NJCA (2014) further indicates that JCs reflect senior local governments’ structures. The only difference is that JCs are apolitical, and junior councillors serve voluntarily. Like senior councils, JCs are geographically confined; they represent the needs of school-going children within their jurisdictions. Augsberger et al. (2017:4) provide a more nuanced definition; they define JCs as “formal bodies made up of youth (typically ages 16-18) who advise high-level decision-makers and elected officials.” However, it is important to note that JCs’ age ranges vary across jurisdictions. In South Africa, grades 8 to 11 are included, with an age range of 12 to 17 (Monakali, 2024; Phillips, 2024; News24, 2024).

Literature has shown that JCs have a long history that can be traced from the early 1940s (Augsberger et al., 2017). During this period, JCs occupied a peripheral role. According to Collins, Augsberger & Gecker (2016), quoted in Augsberger et al. (2017:3), the earliest youth councils were meant to provide “leisure-time needs” and deter youth from engaging in petty vandalism and other unwanted activities. Although there have been substantial developments in advancing the JCs' role in governance processes (Phaswana, 2016; Pyakurel, 2023), recent research shows some resemblance to the old systems; JCs often place ceremonial roles (Makulilo, 2022; Munyede, Mazambani & Maja, 2021). According to

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Munyede, Mazambani & Maja (2021:131), "JCs lacked adequate funding and technical support, resulting in tokenistic participation in local governance." JCs are not adequately institutionalised to participate in and influence local governance policies.

Junior Councils' Roles, Representation and Engagement

The literature widely recognises JCs as important platforms for leadership development (Makulilo, 2022; Collins, Augsberger & Gecker, 2018; Monakali, 2024). Monakali (2024) notes that these forums equip junior councillors with multiple skills, for instance, leadership, programme planning and management and public speaking skills. Monakali (2024) further highlights efforts city councils in South Africa are making to further equip the junior with the knowledge, skills and abilities required for them to actively engage with and in governance matters. For instance, city councils are involved and helping junior councillors to understand municipal budgetary processes and the Integrated Development Plan. Such initiatives empower youth to understand important development plans and processes and give them insights into resource allocation processes and how they impact local development.

However, the literature highlights some critical ingredients for junior councillors to achieve the intended outcomes. Augsberger et al. (2017:3) emphasise the need for youth-adult partnerships. Their study reveals that JCs require adult guidance and mentorship for them to be effective. This highlights the need for creating structures that facilitate adult-youth partnerships and ensure that "youth and adults will collaborate in all aspects of group decision making from visioning, to program planning, to evaluation and continuous improvement" (Zeldin et al., 2014: 338 quoted in Augsberger et al., 2017:4). Research strongly demonstrates that youth value adult involvement in their programmes (Collins, Augsberger & Gecker, 2018) and youth programmes produce meaningful development results when adults are involved (Augsberger et al., 2017). Zeldin et al. (2014) noted that youth-adult collaboration promotes youth growth in the socio-emotional areas of confidence building, connectedness and mastery. Pyakurel (2023), however, noted that not all adults have the skills to mentor and share decision-making powers, authority and knowledge with youth. Therefore, deliberate and focused capacity-building interventions are crucial for adults-youth partnerships to deliver the intended outcomes.

Additionally, literature underscores diversity and inclusivity as cardinal pillars for effective JCs. Phaswana (2016) indicated that JCs' composition should be representative of the local communities. In support of the preceding argument, Pyakurel (2023) argued that local councils should make deliberate efforts to ensure representation of different races, ethnic groups, social classes and other variables within communities. Monakali (2024) indicated that councils should deliberately reserve seats for youth from sub-communities (small communities within larger communities) such as those with unique economic and/or cultural identity. Although literature acknowledges the importance of and efforts to ensure representation in JCs, underrepresentation of some groups persists. An empirical study by

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Augsberger et al. (2017) found that recruitment and selection processes do not reflect academic representation, as most of the councillors interviewed were in high school at the time of the interviews. Some of the participants reported that “exam schools have a very heavy presence in the council”; “I wish there was more diversity among people from the schools” (Augsberger et al., 2017:11). However, literature on diversity in JCs is dominated by Western scholars. Limited studies have been done in Africa to explore diversity in JCs and provide insights for improvement. This study addresses this gap by exploring diversity in Zimbabwe’s JCs and providing policy insights to address the identified gap.

Methods and Data

The researchers used a qualitative research approach to explore the level of diversity in JCs. Qualitative research was selected due to its epistemological stance, which enables researchers to comprehend the world from the perspective of those involved in the case under study. As Dhobi (2023) notes, qualitative research emphasises the importance of social experiences and interaction in generating knowledge. It highlights participants’ central role in shaping research findings. In qualitative research, based on interpretivism, the world is understood based on the meaning and interpretations individuals attach to their experiences (Schwoerer, 2024; Dhobi, 2023). Given the limited number of people with in-depth knowledge of JCs, the researchers used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The researchers purposively selected JC patrons from several local authorities and local government officials actively involved in JCs’ affairs. After every interview, the researchers requested participants to help them identify other people with in-depth knowledge of the operations of JCs. Through snowball sampling, the researchers managed to identify key participants from the National JCs Association (NJCA) and local governments. The researchers, therefore, conducted key informant interviews with the above-listed participants. Due care was exercised to ensure the inclusion of local authorities at various levels, namely, city councils, municipalities, town councils, local boards and rural district councils and across regions. Guided by the principle of data saturation, the researchers interviewed nine key informants. Two conveniently selected focus group discussions of junior councillors and patrons in Mutare were organized to hear the views of junior councillors and patrons who are involved in selecting JCs at the school level. To complement the primary data, the researchers also used a documentary review. They utilized documents such as newspaper articles and a guide to JCs in Zimbabwe.

The collected data was analysed through a combination of thematic analysis and content analysis, with thematic analysis focused on key informant interview data and content analysis for data from documentary review. Thematic and content analysis helped the researchers to identify recurring issues and develop themes that are presented in the findings section. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity in data presentation and analysis, the researcher used codes. Some of the codes used include the following:

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- P1 CoM Participant 1 City of Masvingo
- P2 CM Participant 2 Chegutu Municipality
- P3 RTC Participant 3 Rusape Town Council
- P4 CoMtre Participant 4 City of Mutare
- P5 NAJC Participant 5 National Association of JCs
- P6 CoMtre Participant 6 City of Mutare
- P7 SRDC Participant 7 Sanyati Rural District Council
- P8 CoB Participant 8 Bulawayo City Council
- P9 URDC Participant 9 Umguza Rural District Council

Results and Discussion

In this section, the researchers present and analyse the main findings of the study. The findings are presented around two major themes: The state of representation and diversity in JCs in Zimbabwe, and the recruitment process and its implications on diversity.

Representation and Diversity in JCs

In terms of composition, the study found that JCs are composed of school-going children from forms 3 to 5 and age ranges from 14 to 17 years and who have not yet reached the majority age for voting (P1, CoM; P2, CM; P3, RTC; P6, NJCA). There were, however, reported cases of some local authorities accommodating junior councillors below 14 years. According to P5 (NJCA),

"Some local authorities, such as Chipinge Town Council and Chirumanzu District Council, involve Grade 6 students in the junior council. These students can even hold positions such as town secretary, chairperson, or mayor, and they often demonstrate greater articulation and awareness than some students in O-Level or A-Level. Managing this situation can be somewhat challenging. However, I believe that establishing clear regulations and structures through legislation can encourage everyone to adhere to consistent standards.

The above quotation highlights the implications of operating without regulations. The absence of laws has resulted in inconsistencies in the age profiles of JCs across local authorities. The study also found exclusion cases, particularly among big cities such as Harare, Mutare and Bulawayo, among others, where the focus is mainly on Advanced ('A') level students. This impacts the representation of those at lower levels, who unfortunately represent the majority of school-going youth. In support of this view, P6 (NJCA) highlighted that,

"If only Lower Six students — those in O-Level who won't have the opportunity to proceed to A-Level the following year — are selected, it implies that their involvement in local governance and civic affairs

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ends there. Similarly, excluding primary school students means they have no representation at all. However, we argue that service delivery affects every child, even from birth. Including junior councillors from primary schools ensures that the voices and perspectives of younger students are also heard."

To establish JCs that truly represent their constituencies and enhance diversity and inclusivity, these gaps must be addressed.

The study revealed improvements in diversity in the JCs' composition across local authorities. Most local authorities have included children with disabilities in their structures (P1, CoM; P3, RTC; P4, CoMtre). For instance, P8 (CoB) noted that to enhance the inclusion of persons with disabilities, the council collaborates with King George School, a school that caters for persons with disabilities. Through this collaboration, the council requests that the school send representatives for consideration. P9 (URDC) offered a fascinating perspective on their innovative approaches to including children with disabilities in JC. The participant had this to say:

"*In terms of diversity, there is a practice that we normally follow that ensures promising students with disabilities are automatically selected as junior councillors without going through the election process. This is because requiring them to participate in elections may result in their elimination, so they are given preferential consideration under this practice."* (P9, URDC).

This is a milestone achievement given the historical marginalisation of persons with disabilities in the developing world. There was also consensus among participants on the inclusion of young people from different social backgrounds. In support of this view, P1 (CoM) had this to share: "From our selection, we reach out to all schools in the area. We have three who are from upper schools who participate, a third representing those who are from low density, then two-thirds representing those from high density". P2 (CM), although he expressed concern about their quality of their participation, also acknowledged local governments' efforts to include even students from low-income families, orphans included. When probed on the inclusion of students from low-income families in JCs, participants had this to say:

"As a Council, we do deliberate favouritism. As a City, we go to every school asking for five to 10 kids to participate and from those 10, we want children with disabilities, children who are orphans, children from child-headed families and those from lower classes" (P1, CoM).

"I believe our councils are representative because we always include individuals of mixed race, and there's a balanced representation of boys and girls. Regarding socioeconomic backgrounds, our students come from diverse areas, including very impoverished ones; for example, we have recruited from as far as Insuza, which is a remote area. We recruit from all secondary schools—Government, private, and council—to ensure this diversity. We also ensure our junior council members present a

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unified appearance during travel and activities, making their social class or background indistinguishable." (P9, URDC).

"Yes, definitely in our setup, we have mostly participants from poor backgrounds, but the challenge with these kids is that they need a lot of nurturing because they become shy to mix with other groups - they end up being left out" (P2, CM).

This highlights the importance of ongoing, targeted recruitment and capacity-building programmes to promote diversity and inclusion. Local governments should organise awareness campaigns and team-building activities that encourage diversity and interaction among junior councillors from different backgrounds. This approach will help foster collaboration and cooperation among junior councillors from diverse backgrounds.

The study further noted remarkable improvements in including the gendered dimension in JCs. Participants noted an increase in the percentage of girls in JCs. For instance, in the City of Masvingo, nine of the 15 junior councillors (60%) are girls (P1, CoM); in Chegutu Municipality, 13 of the 20 junior councillors (65%) are girls (P2, CM); in Rusape Town Council, 13 of the 16 JCs (81%) are girls (P3, RTC); in the City of Mutare, 11 of the 20 junior councillors (55%) are girls (P4, CoMtre); and in Sanyati District Council, 11 of the 18 junior councillors (61) are girls. P8 (CoB) noted that the City of Bulawayo has a strong policy towards gender diversity in JCs. The participant explained that

"We demonstrate strong gender diversity. For example, our current council has more female members than male. Furthermore, all candidates are encouraged to compete for leadership positions like junior mayor or junior mayoress. It is particularly noteworthy that we consistently fill both the junior mayor and junior mayoress roles, ensuring balanced representation. The junior mayoress position is especially valuable as it addresses the crucial need to engage girls, allowing us to align with the priorities of organizations that emphasize female involvement."

The analysis of this gender distribution indicates a significant skewness towards girls, showing that they now dominate the JCs. In support of this observation, P5 (NJCA) explained,

"While we've always aimed for gender balance in the Junior Council, we've recently observed a significant shift in recruitment trends. For the past two to three years, approximately 85% of our recruits have been girls, indicating a potential need to now advocate for greater male representation to maintain gender balance."

There is, therefore, a need to ensure gender balance and equity to avoid the domination of one gender at the expense of the other. If not attended to, this might compromise diversity in future. Further, some participants questioned the level of diversity in JCs. Some participants were of the view that JCs do not represent all segments of the community. For instance, P1 (CoM) argued that,

"In my view, they may not fully represent all groups. This is because, in our urban areas, we have several boarding schools, and students from other provinces come to learn in Masvingo, subsequently becoming councillors for a province they are not originally from".

The above argument shows that the dominance of boarding schools in some localities crowds out students from local communities. Given the competence-based selection process, students from boarding schools are most likely to pass the various assessments compared to those in day schools. This is mainly because boarding schools mainly target high performers at the primary Grade 7 level. The challenge presents a policy opportunity for local authorities and other stakeholders involved in the selection process to ensure balance across schools within a particular locality. There were also some concerns among participants about bias towards Government schools, leaving out private schools (P3, RTC). This affects the involvement of students in private schools that tend to dominate most urban areas. There is, therefore, a need to involve students from all registered private schools. This is crucial given that the challenges those in Government schools might face differ from those that learners in private schools face. As Pyakurel (2023) noted, local councils should make deliberate efforts to ensure representation of different races, ethnic groups, social classes and other variables within communities. Monakali (2024) indicated that councils should deliberately reserve seats for youth from sub-communities (small communities within larger communities) such as those with unique economic and/or cultural identity.

The scope of JCs was also flagged as a critical factor undermining diversity and inclusion. The junior councillors' target population excludes those out of school. The situation becomes worse in big cities that tend to focus mainly on A-level students. As P6 (CoMtre) noted,

"Obviously, those that failed at an ordinary level and, as you are aware, I think our pass rate is around 30% and below. So it means the majority don't even go to a level. So naturally, it means they've been excluded from the selection".

It is evident from the above discussion that although there are signs of improvements in enhancing diversity in JCs, particularly on the involvement of the girl child, some segments of youths from marginalized communities and backgrounds are still on the periphery. These findings align with Maphosa and Philani's (2024) findings, which critiqued youth councils for their lack of diversity and failure to accommodate youths from diverse backgrounds.

To foster diversity, the scope should be widened to include out-of-school youths within the age range acceptable for one to be in JCs. Out-of-school youths are an important constituent facing unique challenges and should be included in JCs so their issues can be heard and considered in policy processes. As one of the participants quoted in Maphosa and Philani's (2024:88) illustrated, "solutions to the most pressing issues of youth are found through the interaction and involvement of all young

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regardless of your level of standing." These sentiments were confirmed by Zhou and Tandi (2023), who highlighted the centrality of diversity in realising meaningful youth participation, inclusion and innovation in local governance.

Recruitment Process and Implications on Diversity

The study discovered variations in the junior councillors' recruitment and selection process. The first perspective revealed a collaborative-based recruitment and selection process involving multiple actors from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, the Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing and the NJCA. As P2 (CM) explained, the process starts with the local government's request for the theme of the year from the NJCA. Upon receiving the theme of the year, local governments invite schools to recruit prospective candidate in schools within their areas of jurisdiction (P1, CoM; P3, RTC; P4, CoMtre; P5, NJCA). As P1 (CoM) explained, "*We send invitations to schools throughout Masvingo. Every child from both Masvingo urban and rural areas is welcome to participate. We also provide them with the year's theme and a list of practice questions for their school preparation before they come for selection.*" At the school level, schools vet the candidates using varying methods. Commenting on the school vetting process, P9 (URDC) illustrated that schools vet prospective candidates based on how they perform and their level of discipline. The participant emphasised the importance of discipline, arguing that "*we also don't want to take the child who is problematic to represent the student*". While schools must prioritise discipline, placing too much emphasis on it may exclude candidates who possess valuable political skills. Schools should accommodate students with different attitudes or behaviours and create mentoring platforms. In support of this argument, P9 (URDC) highlighted that.

"Even children who may be perceived as 'naughty' but show potential should not be sidelined, as they can become the voice for others like them. We once had a junior councilor from Nyamandlovu who was an outlier and originally from South Africa. She was quite different from the others, openly stating that teenage pregnancy occurs because 'sex is enjoyable and we love it.' By including her in the junior council, we were able to gain valuable insights, and she represented all sexually active teenagers. I believe we shouldn't discriminate against these children by excluding them simply because they are considered 'naughty.' Some may be mischievous but still possess the potential for positive change. Who knows the consequences of exclusion? We now have young parents who have returned to school, and my recommendation is that we should not exclude those children either".

The above views demonstrate that the actors involved in selecting junior councillors are making deliberate efforts to involve candidates with varying backgrounds, including rural and urban schools and high and low-density schools, in cases of urban local authorities and minority groups, such as children with disabilities. However, all these improvements have been realised without clear guidelines on

recruiting junior councillors. When asked about the existence of recruitment guidelines, participants had this to say:

"We do not provide formal guidelines. Schools are informed about the role of the Junior Council (registered under the Rotary Club) and its purpose: to represent children and serve as a bridge between the senior council and junior council. Schools then independently decide who best represents their institution." (P8, CoB).

"We just tell schools that they should give us non-examination classes, those good at public speaking, and those who have gone through the process of being voted for by their peers" (P9, URDC).

Although participants noted the lack of guidelines for recruiting junior councillors, some acknowledged the presence of the NJCA guidelines. Operating without clear guidelines resulted in inconsistencies that compromise diversity in JCs. For instance, the study revealed some variation in the final selection of junior councillors. Some participants highlighted the final selection as the responsibility of the schools, through school patrons and or other designated officers. The perspective highlighted the dominant role of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in the recruitment and selection process. P7 (SRDC) explained, "The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education assists us. They conduct interviews, followed by presentations, and then nominations. Essentially, schools conduct initial interviews and then forward the names of selected candidates." Additionally, P3 (RTC) revealed that "Our school patrons identify willing students who then compete against each other, and we work with the winners." The preceding quotations show that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, through schools, is responsible for the initial recruitment and the final selection of candidates. After completing the recruitment and selection process, the schools submit the names of successful candidates to the local authority. In this case, schools employ various assessments, such as oral presentations, written tests, and competitions of different formats, to select the final candidates who will be sent to the local government for induction and subsequent processes.

On the other hand, some participants highlighted that the schools, through patrons and other designated officers, do the initial screening and submit a list of names to their respective local governments for the final selection. The participants' views presented verbatim below support this observation:

"Selection is done first for Lower 6 students from schools within the City. Each school submit a list of students representing wards, for example, 5 to 10 students. Interviews are then conducted with the nominated students by the City Council" (P4, CoMtre).

"After receiving the schools' submissions, the local authority reduces the number of candidates by conducting interviews and organising activities. These activities may include assignments where potential candidates are asked to gather specific information and make presentations" (P5, NAJC).

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"Our system isn't ward-based. Instead, we write to schools and ask for five recommended lists of names. Once we receive names from the schools, we conduct interviews. From those interviews, we select two candidates." (P8, CoB).

The above views show local governments' involvement in the final selection processes, using assessments of varying formats. Some local governments work with representatives from schools in the final selection process. As P1 (CoM) explained,

"We engage independent adjudicators to ensure objectivity and neutrality. Usually, we take from schools (adjudicators), some from urban and some from rural areas. We usually take from the province at least one teacher per district; at least they are not biased because they do not teach the kids".

In some local authorities, the final selection is done using a combination of interviews and a voting system. In this case, upon receiving names from schools, local authorities organise open interviews where people vote for the best presenter. According to P8 (CoB),

"When schools submit five names, the children must speak to questions like, 'What would I do in this role?' The other candidates listen and then vote for the best two. From there, the two with the highest votes are selected. We aim to empower the children through this process".

In line with the above view, P9 (URDC) illustrated that,

"Junior councillors are selected from their various schools and undergo a process similar to senior councillors. They campaign, are voted for, and must reside in the local area. At the school level, we ask the school to conduct voting processes, and afterwards, they provide us with the selected students. At the council level, unlike politicians who gain popular votes, junior councillors are given a prompt question they must address. Thus, junior councillors are voted based on the quality of their answers to the questions provided."

Participants identified interviews as one of the most commonly used selection methods. Although in some instances, interviews were conducted in local languages, participants cited English as the main language used. Some participants, however, flagged the use of English in interviews and other selection events as an existential threat to diversity. Participants noted that the use of English undermines diversity and inclusion, as most learners from rural schools might not be fluent in it. When asked about the use of English, P1 (CoM) had this to say

"Yes, that's quite a hindrance, some kids will be coming from high-density suburbs, he/she may be able to speak in English but he/she may not be proficient in English like someone from low-density schools, so he/she may not be comfortable and confident enough to express himself thereby hindering him/her to become a junior councilor".

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Therefore, to ensure fair representation, those recruiting junior councilors must allow candidates to express themselves in their most comfortable language. Prioritizing English fluency, strong public speaking, or academic giftedness would unfairly lead to Junior Councils being dominated by youth from affluent communities. This would effectively exclude young people from high-density, hard-to-reach areas, low-income households, or those attending lower-quality schools, as they often lack access to the same educational advantages. Harada's (2021) study supports the preceding view. It revealed that language and knowledge gaps among young people create barriers to communication, which result in some youth being excluded.

Although there are variations in recruitment and selection processes, participants agreed that the process concludes with induction sessions organised by local governments. Junior councillors and patrons who participated in the focus group discussions indicated that, after careful and rigorous selection processes, successful candidates went through induction training and a swearing-in ceremony. The induction training serves several important purposes. As P5 (NAJC) noted,

"Junior councillors are officially sworn in, but their induction training provides essential information, knowledge, and skills for their roles. This training covers leadership principles, community engagement, the junior council mandate, child rights, grooming and etiquette, a code of conduct, and local authority structures. Team-building activities are also included to fully equip them for their duties."

However, the issue of favouritism was highlighted as a challenge hindering diversity and inclusivity in JCs. Some participants complained that those responsible for selecting students sometimes select those they like without following the procedures. To support this view, P6 (CoMtre) explained,

"Schools are supposed to introduce the message to all scholars. However, as we speak today, some schools—perhaps senior teachers or headmasters—may then just go and pick their favourite child to forward to the local authority."

In support of the preceding argument, P1 (CoM) revealed,

"We have also noticed a bias where, if someone is interested in a particular child, they might ensure that child becomes the junior town clerk or junior chief executive. This has led to a system where we decided to allow them to vote among themselves and to establish their own structures, even for executive offices and policy-making roles. While we view junior councillors as non-politicians, this self-selection process is guided and overseen by seniors."

The research also discovered that there are no laws guiding JCs and their operations. Participants noted that the operations of JCs were regulated through the National Junior Council Association guidelines. As P8 (CoB) explained,

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"We are currently working to improve the structures and systems of the Junior Council. Previously, there was no central government legal framework under the Urban Councils Act or the Rural District Councils Act for Junior Councils. Consequently, their establishment relied solely on lobbying local authorities, with efforts from the National Junior Councils Association, civil society organizations, development partners, other government departments, and the local authorities themselves."

The quotation above indicates that JCs were created through communications from the Ministry of Local Government, council resolutions, without any national legislation to regulate them. This lack of regulation explains the inconsistencies in recruitment, selection processes, and structures across local authorities. Munyede, Mazambani and Maja's (2021) study also supports this observation. Their study highlighted the unclear legal status of JCs as a major factor undermining their operations. Harada (2021) underscores the need for clear policies and structures for inclusive and diverse youth participation. For JCs to achieve the desired result, there is a need for regulations to guide their operations. Without regulations, implementation inconsistencies will persist and realising diversity becomes accidental.

Conclusion

The article shows that the Government of Zimbabwe has made significant strides towards promoting youth participation in local governance processes. JCs have provided a structured platform and environment for youth to engage in local governance issues, develop advocacy skills, and understand democratic processes. As the article demonstrates, local authorities are introducing various strategies to enhance diversity in JCs. These strategies have witnessed remarkable improvements in the inclusion of girls, persons with disabilities and young people from marginalised communities. However, regardless of these improvements, the article found inconsistencies in the recruitment processes and diversity gaps that should be addressed to foster the representation of all youth. The article found that diversity is not adequately prioritised. Youths, particularly those who are not academically gifted, those from low-income and hard-to-reach areas and children with disabilities are not actively engaged and involved. Furthermore, some of the recruitment and selection methods used perpetuate the marginalisation of some segments of the youth. These gaps highlight the need for a regulatory framework to guide the recruitment process as well as the operations of JCs. Additionally, there is a need for concerted efforts to enhance diversity in JCs. Failing to promote diversity in these bodies will further marginalize youth from disadvantaged communities and groups. Without genuine inclusion, Junior Councils risk becoming unrepresentative, perpetuating existing societal inequalities, and failing to use the full potential of diverse youth perspectives.

To address the identified gaps, the study proffers the following recommendations:

- The Ministry of Local Government and Public Works, the National Junior Council Association (NJCA), and local authorities should collaborate to update the existing manual for Junior Councils. This update is crucial and should involve developing a specific framework or comprehensive guidelines dedicated to diversity and inclusion in the recruitment and selection of junior councilors. These new guidelines would ensure that the process actively seeks out and engages young individuals from a wide array of backgrounds, thereby fostering a more representative and equitable Junior Council.
- To widen recruitment for junior councillors, councils should raise awareness on platforms popular with young people, like official Council websites, local radio, and social media such as TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram. This may include creating engaging content, like short videos and flyers, to inform youth about the Junior Council program. Using these platforms can attract more participants, encourage involvement from underrepresented groups, and achieve a more inclusive outcome.
- To foster a truly inclusive recruitment and selection process, councils should simplify application procedures and use accessible, inclusive language throughout, especially during interviews. This includes encouraging the use of local languages. Furthermore, the selection process must be designed to mitigate bias against candidates lacking confidence or fluency in English. This could involve offering alternative presentation formats or providing pre-interview support, ensuring neither language nor confidence hinders participation.
- To boost diversity in Junior Councillors' selection, local authorities should expand recruitment beyond standard interviews. Innovative methods like community nominees, talent shows, and recognizing stories of resilience can help students show their unique potential. This includes considering expressions through art, sports, and volunteer work. Councils could also reserve seats for Junior Councillors elected by peer-to-peer voting among students, ensuring representatives reflect their peers' diversity.
- To achieve a truly diverse Junior Council, local authorities need to ensure that the selection committees themselves are diverse, reflecting the community's varied backgrounds. Councils can include representatives like Persons with Disabilities, community leaders, civic organisations and junior council alumni to bring a range of perspectives into the evaluation process, promoting inclusivity and understanding in the recruitment.
- Councils should undertake a comprehensive mapping exercise of local communities and all schools within their jurisdiction before recruitment. This should encompass a diverse range of institutions (Government Schools, Council-operated schools, church-affiliated schools, and private schools) and identify diverse ethnic groups within the community. This proactive approach will ensure that the selection process reflects the varied educational landscape

and ethnic composition of the area, providing equal opportunities for students from different backgrounds to participate.

- Local authorities can also utilize existing networks to enhance diversity in the recruitment or selection of junior council members. By collaborating with Government ministries and departments that focus on youth issues, along with various youth organizations, clubs, and groups, councils can tap into a broad spectrum of young individuals. These organizations are already actively engaged with diverse youth communities, offering an efficient channel to reach out to them and encourage their participation.
- To improve diversity in recruiting junior councillors, councils should reserve specific positions for underrepresented groups, such as young people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups, and those from low-income backgrounds. This requires analyzing the local demographic, identifying key groups, and actively engaging with these communities to create a Junior Council that reflects the area's diversity.

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