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More Than the Politics of Decentralization: Local Government Reform, District Development and Public Administration in Zimbabwe

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Summary. — What is evaluated as central government decentralization to improve rural development may also be local government reform for improved district development. The challenge in analyzing such efforts is not to be preoccupied with an always-present politics of decentralization. This article examines a local government reform in Zimbabwe that has been equated with central government decentralization: the Amalgamation of the countryside's two racially different local authorities. Lessons from the Zimbabwe experience have implications for similar efforts in postapartheid South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Development journals, including *World Development*, continue to give attention to government decentralization, the discussion of which is often cast in terms of the "politics of decentralization."[1] The Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) has embarked on a reform which is said to pivot on the politics of decentralizing rural development. In reality, the reform is not only about decentralization or politics or rural development. If its implementors are correct, the initiative is much more about reforming local government in a way that promotes economic development at the district level by capitalizing on the scarce administrative and technical skills within the local authorities.

2. AMALGAMATION AND ITS BACKGROUND[2]

The reform in question is the consolidation (officially, the Amalgamation) of Zimbabwe's two rural local authorities, the rural councils (representing largely white, commercial farming interests) and the district councils (representing black, largely communal area residents). Some background comments on commercial and communal areas are necessary here.

Zimbabwe's total land area is approximately 39 million hectares, about 33.3 million (85%) of which have been set aside for agricultural purposes. This agricultural land has two dimensions of interest to this article, land tenure and agroecology. The main tenure categories in rural areas are: commercial (freehold), with commercial subdivided into large-scale commercial (mostly, white farmers) and small-scale commercial (black farmers); communal land; and more recently, resettlement areas.[3] The country's agroecological zones are natural regions I–V, with region I being the best in terms of rainfall and soil conditions and region V the worst.

As of 1989, there were (in round numbers) 4,000 large-scale commercial farmers owning 11.2 million hectares; one million communal families holding 16.3 million; 10,000 small-scale commercial farmers on 1.4 million; and 52,000 resettlement farmers (that is, black Zimbabweans) on 3.3 million hectares. A great deal of agricultural land (a third of it) thus remains in the hands of the white farming population. Moreover, this land is in the better-off areas. Over half of the large-scale commercial farming land is in regions I, II and III, while over three-quarters of the communal land is in regions IV and V. About 60% of the communal area population live in the arid and semi-arid regions IV and V, the vast majority of whom have been smallholders in mixed crop and livestock enterprises.[4]

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The land distribution is important because of the preeminent role large-scale farms play in the country's agricultural cash economy. The large-scale commercial farming sector has accounted for some 75% of the country's marketed agricultural output. Indeed, over 40% of the country's annual foreign exchange reserves has come from the agricultural industry, with some 85% of that due to products generated through large-scale farming. Large-scale farms also employ more than 25% of Zimbabwe's wage earners. Still, it is estimated that six or seven out of every 10 Zimbabweans obtain livelihood from communal lands agriculture. To give an indication what these figures mean at the household level, a sample survey in one of the districts visited for this article's research found that average annual household income among communal farmers was about Z$1,100, while the average household income in established commercial farming areas of the same district was over Z$400,000.[5]

With that background, we turn now to local government. Rural councils have been the local authorities for the commercial farming areas, while district councils have been the local authorities for the communal areas. District councils were themselves consolidated from the African councils of the preindependence era, while a number of rural councils trace their history back to roads committees established by colonial farmers. At independence, small-scale commercial areas had a choice to join rural or district councils, and some chose to join the former, others the latter. Resettlement areas have been under the direct control of central government.

Amalgamation alters this local government set-up. At the time of writing, rural councils and district councils were in the process of being abolished and a new rural district council (RDC) established in their place. There would now be one local authority, the consolidated RDC, for each district (there are over 50 districts). The vast majority of councillors are to be elected from district wards (no more than 20% of all councillors can be appointed), and the wards would continue to follow land tenure categories found in the district prior to the creation of the amalgamated RDC. Depending on the district, there could be four basic types of rural wards within an RDC: commercial wards for the large-scale farming areas; commercial wards for its small-scale farming areas; communal wards; and resettlement wards. (Urban areas will have their own wards.) In short, while Amalgamation changes local government, it does not change the land tenure distribution, though in the case of resettlement areas the change from central to local government could be considerable.

Consequently, voting requirements for councillor elections are not planned to alter substantially after Amalgamation. Communal ward residents will still vote for their councillors according to universal franchise, while only ratepayers in the commercial wards (that is, property owners) have the right to vote for commercial ward councillors. Commercial area farmworkers still have no right to vote for the councillor from the commercial ward in which they live and work. Farmworkers would be expected to vote, if they vote at all, by registering in their communal wards of origin (which a number no longer have or ever had). Nonetheless, the new RDCs would have a majority of black councillors, if simply for the reason that communal, resettlement and small-scale commercial wards shall outnumber large-scale commercial wards.[6] Indeed, the number of black councillors should increase, as the GOZ land reform program increases its purchase and conversion of commercial farms into resettlement areas.

3. CONVENTIONAL WISDOM ABOUT AMALGAMATION

Some readers may be wondering why, after more than a decade of independence, consolidation of the white and black councils began in earnest only recently. The answer most readily given in Zimbabwe is that President Mugabe wants to tie up the countryside for his ruling party, ZANU(PF), prior to the 1995 elections. The rural areas have been a strong source of support for him, and if council elections can be held before multipartyism takes root in the countryside, all the better for the ruling party's future. For the same reason, Amalgamation may not be fully implemented, if he sees council elections and operations as a vote on ZANU(PF)'s handling of the country's recent drought and structural adjustment program.

Politics of the countryside course through much of the literature on Amalgamation and its enacting legislation, the Rural District Councils Act of 1988. The

> desire [of rural councils] to preserve social and political institutions of the past is a central feature [of Amalgamation] and has to be tackled as a political problem... Will [Amalgamation] result in distortion of the problem of rural underdevelopment and hence the need for agrarian change, or will it result in some form of redistribution (albeit in a limited form) of resources, particularly if District Councils have access to capital assets held by the Rural Councils?[7]

Another well-informed academic observes that "Amalgamation of the two forms of rural government has always been seen as a political priority" adding it "would do away with a last vestige of colonial government structure and it would enable the process of rural restructuring to continue."[8] "In spite of the post-independence successes in decentralization, the future for effective decentralization depends crucially on the financial measures needed to complement the RDC Act," he argues. "Without these, the future of decen-

tralized provision of local public goods and services and of rural local government is bleak."[9] "One of the most important dimensions of rural development policy in Zimbabwe since independence has been rural local government reform, in particular decentralization policy," concludes another longtime observer.[10] Decentralization remains an important topic in Zimbabwe's university circles, and Amalgamation is discussed in two excellent books circulating there, *Decentralizing for Participatory Planning?* and *Limits to Decentralization in Zimbabwe*.[11]

Academics are not alone in these views. A ministry handbook for RDCs notes that changes brought about by Amalgamation "should be viewed from the broader context of Government's efforts to fundamentally restructure the administrative and economic dispensations of the rural communities and fashion them into a unified entity under a common management pursuing the goal of uplifting living standards for all in the countryside." The handbook then describes Amalgamation in a distinctly decentralized fashion, where it "ensures that people's needs are determined and planned for at the lowest level and not imposed from above. It is a way of bringing government closer to the people."[12]

Similar views are echoed in the donor community. A recent consultant's report on the GOZ and rural institutions concludes "Amalgamation can be used as the basis for devolving substantial power from central to local government" and recommends that "Amalgamation must be accompanied by a powerful vision of regenerated rural development through local accountability and participation with the new RDCs."[13]

These opinions on Amalgamation, while widespread and accurate as far as they go, unduly narrow the scope of Amalgamation for those who are to implement it. These latter views are discussed in the remainder of this article.

4. A VIEW FROM BELOW: AMALGAMATION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

The following findings are based on a study undertaken between May and July 1992, just as the Amalgamation process was beginning.[14] Six districts were visited, and in each district the major implementors of the Amalgamation exercise were interviewed, namely, the district administrator (who is responsible for overseeing and implementing Amalgamation in the district) and the two rural government secretaries (the senior executive officer/district council and the chief executive officer/rural council). Other local officials were also questioned, including a rural council chair and vice-chair, a district council finance committee, and several assistant district administrators. A total of 38 people were interviewed in the districts.

Because of the provocative nature of their quotes,[15] two measures have been taken to ensure confidentiality of the interviewees. No names are given and in only one instance are positions mentioned. Interviewees have also been grouped by their affiliated organization, that is, by district council (DC), rural council (RC) and district administration (DA). These three groupings over the six districts represent the core 18 "respondents" referred to below. Only two instances were detected where interviewees within the same respondent group differed in their responses, and these differences are incidental to the findings of the following four subsections.[16]

(a) *First pass at the problems of Amalgamation*

A quick survey of local official concerns over rural district councils would conclude Amalgamation has little chance of success. The most frequently mentioned objective given for Amalgamation is to unify the two local authorities into one, less fragmented whole (10 of the 18 respondents said as much).[17] Yet the divide between district and rural councils appears, at least on initial inspection, too great to permit that. The two local governments seem locked into a zero-sum conflict, with district councils the winners only if rural councils are losers.

During the interviews, comparisons were repeatedly made between, on the one hand, communal areas, communal people, district councils and district councillors, and on the other hand, commercial areas, commercial farmers, rural councils and rural councillors. Whatever their factual merits,[18] the important point is that both black and white interviewees agreed on the comparisons. At least two among the three different types of respondents (i.e., district council, rural council and district administration) said:

- Communal areas are not economically viable because they are abused and destroyed, while commercial areas are economically viable because they are conserved and managed.
- Communal people are occupiers of the land, noncommercial and typically do not pay taxes, while commercial farmers are owners of the land, business-minded and typically do pay taxes.
- District councils are highly subsidized, dependent on central government, and relatively inefficient, while rural councils are relatively self-supporting, independent of central government, and efficient.[19]
- District councillors see themselves entitled to privileges, allowances and a salaried position, while rural councillors see themselves volunteering their time for responsibilities that are more a burden than source of income.[20]

As one DA respondent put the divide: "Look at the two agendas [of rural and district council meetings] and you'll see how miles apart we are." A DC respondent is more philosophical: "Perhaps we've had too long a history of separation" to make Amalgamation work. It is here that the many parallels between consolidating racially distinct local authorities in Zimbabwe and South Africa are most congruent.

From the divide said to separate Zimbabwe's rural local governments, many have found it fairly easy to conclude that district councils have everything to gain from Amalgamation and rural councils everything to lose:

- According to a RC respondent, "There is bound to be a deterioration in standards" in the commercial wards with Amalgamation, while a DC respondent in the same district says indeed there would be "some deterioration," though in the short run only.
- A RC respondent worries that "district councils have the absolute minimum [of assets]" and that "district council will see [our road equipment] as a resource to use." A DC respondent in the same district basically agrees by saying that the "district council is poor, it has no equipment to do roads; rural council is much better equipped, so we will spread the equipment to the poorer areas."
- A RC respondent fears that communal ward councillors in the RDC will look over the fence and see the houses, cattle and equipment on the commercial farms and then vote to raise commercial ward rates, while a DC respondent in another district sums up Amalgamation by saying it is "taking levies from the rich side [of the fence] and putting it to the poor side."
- A DA respondent worries that communal farmers will take Amalgamation to mean that commercial farms must now open their grazing to communal farmers, while a DC respondent in another district says that, unless Amalgamation is spelled out clearly, some villagers will see it as "repossession of their farms" taken by the colonialists.

"In a sense, their fears are valid," concludes a district council respondent of rural council concerns over Amalgamation. Eleven of the 18 respondents see a very real conflict of interest and priorities — two called it a "tug of war" — developing after the local authorities are amalgamated. Here too in the redistribution of resources within systems formerly under white rule are there parallels between Zimbabwe and postapartheid South Africa.

When asked what were the possible areas of cooperation between district and rural councils, four respondents mentioned roads, three agriculture, two water development or development planning, but by far the most common response was the pause, as respondents tried to think of an answer. Of the 11 respondents who expressed an opinion, six were pessimistic and five were uncertain about the prospects of Amalgamation. Three of those who were pessimistic and all who were uncertain are black.

(b) *Second pass: the overriding problem of financial viability*

Views in the preceding subsection are incomplete in several important respects:

- For a start, apparently not many rural people know of Amalgamation. One DC respondent thought less than 10% of his district residents knew about it, another DC respondent estimated the figure to be less than 30% for his area, and a third DC respondent even said only "three-quarters of [his] councillors knew what Amalgamation is, and one-quarter only can guess about it."[21]
- For some the divide between communal and commercial is bridgeable. Indeed, there are black interviewees who see a positive role for white leadership in addressing communal area problems. (It deserves stressing that their comments, like others in the article, were freely volunteered.) According to one DA respondent, Amalgamation would "reduce quality of debate for rural councillors, while increasing quality of debate for district councillors." A DC respondent thought that large-scale commercial farmers paying their high rates would "challenge" communal people to pay more. His point: If our commercial counterparts can pay cattle and grain taxes, why can't we do the same in the communal areas? Another DA respondent, who welcomes commercial wards as needed encouragement for privatizing communal land, basically asked: If they can have title deeds that side, why can't communal farmers have them this side?
- A final way in which the earlier views are incomplete is, however, the most instructive. A much more basic issue was found to preoccupy the 18 respondents: *the financial viability of RDCs*.

The single most frequent problem volunteered by respondents about Amalgamation is the fact that the new rural district councils will be financially unworkable in terms of revenues meeting mandated responsibilities. Thirteen of the respondents see ensuring the

financial viability of the new local authority as an important, if not the central, challenge facing Amalgamation. The other five respondents are worried about the related issues of how rates and levies are to be set among the different types of wards and the need for central government to provide a greater share of tax revenue to the RDCs. Indeed, 12 respondents see setting rates and levies as a very real and urgent problem for the RDCs. The problem of rates is what, in the words of a DA respondent, "prolonged the Amalgamation exercise in the first place."

In sum, it is not clear to any respondent how the rural district councils are to be effectively financed and just who is to provide what by way of revenue to them.[22] "The question of viability has not been answered" says a RC respondent. "Government hasn't come up with any meaningful ideas, not even a clue, on how to make RDCs viable" is how one DC respondent expressed it. "Politically they might be there, but practically they won't," said one black interviewee of the RDCs.

This uncertainty over RDC financial viability forces us to reconsider earlier views. The DC respondent, who says problems will arise because communal farmers who "have never managed a Z$1,000" now become councillors "having to manage thousands more," is referring to a concrete financial management problem, not just to a divide separating communal from commercial. Worries about the attitudes of councillors toward allowances or about the length and number of council meetings are eminently legitimate when the starting point is financial viability. Inefficiency is a real — not racial — problem in such circumstances. Moreover, these concerns are unavoidable if one believes along with a DA respondent that "local authorities are finances, as far as I am concerned" or that finance "is the hub" of local government, as a DC respondent put it.

This central preoccupation with financial viability among local officials responsible for the implementation of Amalgamation was not something I had expected to find, given my reading of the aforementioned Zimbabwe literature and my past familiarity with local authorities in other countries such as Kenya. Like many readers of *World Development*, I was quite prepared to find in Amalgamation the politics of decentralizing rural development writ large. That indeed is there, but what I also found were local officials genuinely worried about the integrity of local government *qua* government, that is, officials who saw council more as organization and administration than as a vehicle for local politics and communal area (namely, rural) development.

For many readers, government decentralization has probably come to mean something like "the process through which government agencies or local organizations obtain the resources and authority for timely adaptations to locally-specific conditions in the field."[23] Decentralization is thus understandably and necessarily about politics in the rural areas, be it deconcentration — the delegation of some administrative responsibilities to rural units of the central government — or devolution — the establishment of rural governments with their own local powers and authority. Yet, the more the interviewees were probed, the more it became clear that, in addition to the politics of decentralizing rural development, Amalgamation was a local government reform that is more than deconcentration but not yet devolution, is much more than politics, and is not just about rural development within each district. Let us examine each briefly.

(c) *Decentralization*

If the 18 respondents are any indication, something much more durable than "deconcentration" is happening under Amalgamation. Local government is becoming entrenched.

Local government is moving from the transitional to the permanent in Zimbabwe — or, at least, to the same kind of permanence that central government has. Even if district councils had been as financially viable as many rural councils are and as some African councils were,[24] the three proved to be never more than transitory local governance. Independence and the liberation struggle ensured that. Amalgamated rural district councils are the first form of local government to arise in post-independence Zimbabwe which no one views as "transitional" to anything other than local government. As one observer put it, "without an elmination of the pre-independence dualism, rural local government will not come to full fruition."[25] This is why financial viability is such a worry: It matters now more than it ever did.

Moreover, the trend is toward a kind of devolution, that is, a local government that governs rather than just sets priorities in Zimbabwe. If the issue had been one simply of deconcentration, then the GOZ could have followed what Kenya has done or what its neighbor Malawi was thinking of doing, i.e., delegate to the district development committee (DDC) — not to the local authorities on the DDC — the responsibility to set important priorities for the line ministries operating in the district. Zimbabwe's RDC Act, in fact, does the reverse: Not only is the DDC incorporated into RDC committee structure, but the Act allows RDC councillors to amend and modify the annual district development plan its DDC proposes. Other elements of devolution are promised in Amalgamation as well, e.g., the district administrator is not automatically the RDC chief executive officer (as was the case with district councils), and central government resettlement areas are, as noted earlier, to become local government administrative wards.

Yet the road to devolution will not be an easy or sure one in Zimbabwe. It is difficult to describe any process that has, since independence, consolidated over 200 African councils into 55 district councils, is now amalgamating these 55 district councils and like number of rural councils into just under 60 rural district councils, and in between then and now has transferred all land allocation powers of local chiefs and headmen to councils and all council responsibilities for primary education to the ministry of primary education as "decentralizing government" in the conventional sense.

Similarly, more immediate concerns work to undermine the implementation of devolution through Amalgamation. An artifact of the ministerial guideline that a rural district council should typically have no more than 30 councillors has been to increase the size of proposed wards in a number of districts. Half of the 18 respondents noted that these district wards were now larger as a result of Amalgamation.[26] Several DC respondents said the wards would, as a result, be much more difficult to cover by councillors. For one respondent this meant that the ward he now represents with six village development committees would have more than three times as many, if Amalgamation proceeded as planned. Another ward is said to have become almost as large as a parliamentary constituency. Amalgamation, in effect, all but scraps an earlier Prime Minister's circular governing the decentralized structure of wards and villages.

In other words, what has happened up to now is that the GOZ has chosen to merge local government units as a way of providing more services to more people rather than to expand the number of these units as a way of introducing more local autonomy to more places.[27] Regionalization of the local authorities rather than the decentralization of government to subdistrict authorities appears to be the road Zimbabwe has currently chosen for devolution.

(d) *Rural development*

Amalgamation is much more about district development than it is about rural (that is, communal area) development. Several factors account for this.

In the first place, rural councils are something of a misnomer. They are also concerned very much with urban development. According to the 1986 Taxation Commission report, there were 41 urban centers and 20 smaller urban areas within rural council boundaries (district council numbers are five and two respectively).[28] During the interviews, RC respondents took considerable pride in pointing out the township developments fostered in their areas. Bringing rural councils into a rural district council format automatically makes RDCs "about" urban development as well.

More compelling reasons explain why Amalgamation must not be just about local government centered on improving rural development.[29] Sharply put, to base RDC financial viability on making the communal areas viable economically dooms RDCs from the start. "With that lot around our neck, we'll go under," said a RC respondent of what he saw as the broken-down communal areas. Nor is he alone in thinking this. If other respondents are the measure, few black officials see a future for themselves or others in the communal lands. To rapidly urbanizing black Zimbabweans, these areas are the Third World. They are the country's unofficial natural region VI, said to be unsuitable for almost anything that is going on there. Whatever the reasons motivating the black elite who designed Amalgamation, one thing is certain: They are not doing it because they want to be better communal farmers.[30]

The bias against rural areas extends beyond the communal lands. No one interviewed had a good word to say about resettlement areas. As for small-scale commercial farming areas, one DC respondent felt they were little different from the communal areas in his district: "Our problems are almost the same," he said. As for large-scale commercial farming areas, no interviewee touted the commercial ranch or farm as a model for improving the economic viability of communal areas, nor did any interviewee argue that the rural development priority of the new RDCs should be the improvement of living conditions for the many disenfranchised commercial farmworkers.

When one adds up these anti-communal, anti-resettlement and anti-commercial sentiments, they equal a markedly pro-urban bias on the part of black respondents. Not one interviewee — black or white — said anything negative about urbanization in the district or anywhere. While two respondents saw in villagization a possible answer to communal land problems, four promoted giving title to land as the way out, and three saw few, if any, "bankable ideas" for these areas, to this interviewer the answer clearly preferred by most respondents was, "Urbanize!" If attempts to modernize communal agriculture — the small-scale commercial farms, followed by resettlement areas, and now the communal area grazing schemes — have not worked, then the next best thing in this view is the growth machine of urbanization. Whatever the merits of this argument, it forces those interested in Amalgamation to look at the full canvas of economic development at the district level, and not just the rural background to that canvas.

(e) *Politics*

Amalgamation is as much about administration and law as it is about politics.

Unlike some other parts of Africa,[31] in Zimbabwe there is a profound tension between politics and administration, where bureaucrats at all levels of government use law and regulation to defend themselves against political interference, while politicians try to change law and regulation as a way of getting administrators to do what they, the politicians, want. The result is that bureaucrats seek to preserve their administrative and technical competence by becoming highly legalistic in orientation.[32]

The tension results in large part because policy is extremely politicized in Zimbabwe. As one senior-level administrator expressed it, the government bureaucrat who calls for new policies always risks being seen as a politician and thus a critic of ZANU(PF). In this kind of environment, it is not surprising that ministry departments continue to be organized around implementing legislation, not policy, and that ministry staff are preoccupied with planning and finances, that is, precisely those issues around which laws can be and have been made.[33]

All this is operating in the Amalgamation exercise. The armature of politics, administration and the law is nicely illustrated by two consecutive interviews in one district. When I asked the district council's senior executive officer what were the aims of Amalgamation, he said that was hard to answer. It had come from the "top" as a "policy" conceived by central government in which they, the council staff, were just "actors." His counterpart, the rural council's chief executive officer, answered the same question by asking: "I expect you've read the Act...?"

Other respondents expressed similar concerns when queried as to what were the aims of Amalgamation. "That one is a bit difficult," answered another DC respondent, "The whole thing was a political decision." Yet what is needed in the view of another DC respondent is to treat "the law as a guiding tool," by which he meant that each RDC's annual development plan should be gazetted into statute. This way RDC priorities could not be tampered with through political interference. But even the law can become politicized and a threat to competence and commonsense. The "average person in Zimbabwe," according to a black interviewee, is "above the law" in that he or she knows "what is right," regardless of any ZANU(PF) legislation mandating otherwise. Some government administrators are embarrassed by the impracticality and expediency of proposals put forward by ministers and councillors they have to work with.

It is precisely in this sense, then, that the respondents' preoccupation with RDC financial viability must be understood: namely, what they see as the pivotal role of competence and commonsense in making a piece of very important legislation less politicized. The RDC Act is politicized not because it is about the politics of decentralization or local government, but because it threatens to place further limitations upon the administrative competence and professionalism of its implementors. It gives politicians powers that would normally be reserved for bureaucrats in other times and places. In a piece of legislation that is some 200 pages long, reference is made on average at least once every page to the minister's or president's powers to amend, modify or otherwise control RDC decisions.[34] To a professionally trained administrator such control is not centralization, it is worse. It is micromanagement by politicians of administrators who should be doing — by virtue of training, experience and professionalism — that administration in the first place.

Just how key this concern is among bureaucrats to preserve and protect their own competence and areas of authority can be glimpsed in what respondents deem to be the necessary qualifications for an RDC's chief executive officer (CEO). All nine respondents who had an opinion on the issue saw as a matter of priority some mix of financial, administrative and/or legal background on the part of the CEO. DA respondents provide the representative comments. According to one, the CEO has to be "someone strong in finance and administration." For another, an "administrative background" and "legal background" "would be quite useful." A third said the CEO "should be having an administrative and financial flair," while a fourth felt the CEO "should possess administrative, legal and finance background." The DA views take on added credence, because district administrators and their assistants, who are seen by others as potential candidates for the CEO position, readily admit they often lack just such a background.

5. CONCLUSION

It should be clear by this point that how Amalgamation is evaluated depends on what is taken as the starting point in analyzing it. If one expects from Amalgamation improved rural development, but finds instead a polarized politics of decentralization cast against the continuing socioeconomic divide separating white from black, commercial from communal, rural rich from rural poor, and bureaucrats from the people, then there is little reason to be optimistic about the exercise or the exercise's usefulness as a model for other racially divided nations in Southern Africa.

If, however, the implication above is correct — that is, Amalgamation is also about the nascent devolution of central government and reform of local government for the purpose of improved district-level development in a way that can maximize the utilization of scarce administrative and technical skills — then there is room for optimism and even excitement over the prospects for Amalgamation as it moves further into its implementation phase.

Optimism is at three levels, first for the future of government devolution, then communal area development, and finally for the financial viability of the RDCs. In the first place, it makes sense within the Zimbabwe context to have a strong legal and administrative foundation at the national level for devolution. Practically, this means with Amalgamation and RDCs in place, people can start taking local government seriously. Fortunately, the seeds for central government devolution of responsibilities to the RDC are already there in the form of the RDC's newly incorporated district development committee.

Once local government is taken seriously, so too can communal area development. It is true that this development has been difficult to achieve in Africa's arid and semi-arid lands. Nonetheless, there is just too great an intersite heterogeneity in Zimbabwe and too high a level of local government administrative and technical competence to rule out that everywhere and at all times economic development of the communal areas cannot be undertaken effectively. One need only look at the expertise and skills large-scale commercial farmers bring to the new local authority to see this.

As for RDC financial viability, just how likely is it that RDCs can become more self-supporting financially? The chances could be fairly good, and the reason for some optimism is straightforward, though indirect. In a very real sense, rural district councils are functionally equivalent to central government parastatals.[35] Obviously, an RDC is not a commercial venture in the same way as is the average parastatal. Nonetheless, both are semi-autonomous, legally mandated bodies working in the districts and having their own budgets and audits. The GOZ and parastatals have shown remarkable success in reducing parastatal subsidies and making some parastatals much more viable. If the GOZ can rationalize and "free up" parastatals, then why not do the same thing for rural district councils?

NOTES

1. See, as an example, Bienen *et al.* (1990), pp. 63–64. As for other journals and at the time of writing, not a volume of *Public Administration and Development* has gone by since 1981 without at least one article (often more) on government decentralization, many of which center as well around the politics of decentralized rural development.

2. Unless otherwise stated, figures and statements used in the next four paragraphs come from Takavarasha (1991). This paper has a wealth of information. Mr. Takavarasha has been a deputy secretary in Zimbabwe's Ministry of Lands, Agriculture and Rural Resettlement.

3. There are also state farms, national parks, and minor residual uses of stateland.

4. See, for example, Jayne *et al.* (1990), pp. 46–47.

5. Wanmali (1992), pp. 94–95. At the time of writing, US$1 = Z$5.

6. For more details on the information provided in this and the preceding paragraph, see Helmsing (1991).

7. de Valk and Wekwete (1990), p. 96.

8. Helsing (1991), p. 97.

9. Helmsing (1991), p. 145.

10. Mutizwa-Mangiza (1990), p. 423.

11. See de Valk and Wekwete (1990) and Helmsing *et al.* (1991).

12. Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development (1990), p. 2.

13. Gunby (1992), pp. 50, 43.

14. The study was commissioned by the Ford Foundation and undertaken for the unit coordinating the Amalgamation exercise within the Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development. The findings and conclusions do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ford Foundation, MLGRUD, or their staff. The following text is a revised version of sections from Roe (1992a).

15. Interviews were not tape-recorded and interviewee quotes have in some cases been reconstructed from notes and recollection of what was said. No attempt was made to solicit the quotes or their specific phrasing. They are not verbatim extracts will all the pausing and starting over common to speech. In a few instances, coding interviewee responses required a judgment call on the author's part.

16. There are, of course, very real differences between bureaucrats and politicians within the same respondent group. Some of these tensions are discussed later in the article under section 4 (e), "Politics."

17. The Trainer's Manual in Ministry of Local Government Rural and Urban Development (1990) states: "The general policy guiding the promulgation of the Rural District Councils Act No. 8 of 1988, was to change and revolutionize the Administrative, Social and Economic structures of rural Zimbabwe, by removing all colonial trappings of separatism based on racialism and its resultant economic imbalances between mainly the country's black and white communities" (Chapter 1, p. 1). Background to this enterprise is given by Brand (1991): "The historical legacy of Zimbabwe makes the 'equalization of conditions' exceedingly difficult. Nonetheless, formal legal, political, and administrative equality rather than collective organization and participation is seen as the most effective way of realizing it" (p. 83). The

significance of the legal, administrative and political is discussed later in the article.

18. In my view, the following comparisons are a development narrative about Zimbabwe's communal lands, one based less on fact than on preexisting and widespread stories about the communal areas (see, Roe, 1991; Roe, 1994a; and Roe, forthcoming).

19. RC respondents said about 80–90% of the Council budgets were funded through local rates and revenue. The 1986 Taxation Commission report records central government grants-in-aid to sample rural councils and district councils as 35.8% and 96.8% of their respective revenues (Government of Zimbabwe, 1986, p. 325). Based on figures of Helmsing (1991), real per-capita central government grants as a percentage of real per-capita revenue for his sample of rural councils and district councils was under 45% and over 80%, respectively, for 1986–87 (Table 20, p. 128).

20. According to de Valk and Wekwete (1990): "Generally, the level of education of [district] councillors is lower than that of the officials with whom they have to deal" (p. 96).

21. An early phase of Amalgamation was to determine the district boundaries for the new RDCs. During one boundary commission, 16 meetings were held with the public in that district's communal and resettlement areas. Attendance at these meetings was recorded as follows: "Nil" for three sites; "poor" for seven sites; "fair" for three sites; "good" for two sites; and "average" for one site. In the words of the commission's 1989 minute: "In all the areas where meetings were held, the question of rates was raised and was a burning issue."

22. Who pays what and when is as important an issue as how much the payment contributes to RDC financial viability. As RC respondents pointed out, a council budget may be balanced, but only at the expense of raising commercial ward rates so revenues can equal expenditures.

23. David Leonard quoted in Uphoff (1986), p. 221.

24. There is a view that African councils were not viable, i.e., their "small size undermined their financial viability and this together with low levels of efficiency caused poor service provision" (Helmsing and Wekwete, 1987, p. 6). Three interviewees, two of them black, dissented, arguing that some African councils were much more viable than district councils.

25. Helmsing (1991), p. 130.

26. Four respondents felt that districts were also too big. The Taxation Commission report (Government of Zimbabwe, 1986) says: "...existing district boundaries are large for local government purposes" (p. 318). One respondent felt even 30 councillors was too many.

27. The dominant focus on government as a service provider, even in the case of the RDCs, is reflected in the Taxation Commission report (Government of Zimbabwe, 1986): "With the amalgamation of rural and district councils...[i]t would be possible for the new rural local authorities to extend local services to the Communal Areas so that direct central government provision of local services in those areas would become unnecessary" (p. 321).

28. The urban figures are taken from p. 317 of the Taxation Commission report (Government of Zimbabwe, 1986).

29. Rural development has come in second to local government before in Zimbabwe, as illustrated by Gasper (1991): "The 1984–85 formation of provincial through to village level development committees contributed, for example, to the demise of the Ministry of Lands, Resettlement and Rural Development, which had been created in 1978, by splitting off sections of the former Ministry of Internal Affairs to be a development agency for the communal lands. A separate ministry for communal lands became incompatible with the new hierarchy of coordinating committees, which was linked instead to local government and administration" (p. 26).

30. It must be asked, What's wrong with the communal lands as they are? Zimbabwe needs places where the old, the young and others can reside if they have nowhere else to go. Communal areas serve that function, and in a way that reproduces what many people there perceive as traditional life. I thank Peter Fry for pointing this out. My own views about the communal areas are different and much more optimistic than those of the interviewees. See Roe (1992b), p. 4; and Roe (forthcoming).

31. One well-known observer of comparative public administration (Montgomery, 1987) speaks of the "relative calm surrounding the politics/administration nexus in Africa" (p. 921).

32. In the Zimbabwe context, "competence" means a sense of professionalism and a commitment to mission on the part of the bureaucrat concerned. Clearly, not all central government and local government employees are competent. Some are corrupt, some politicized and some have no sense of professionalism. The point, though, is that many others want to do a good job and actually do so. This is illustrated from work on the study undertaken for this article. Although I frequently arrived unannounced, I was able to interview all the chief executive officers (CEOs), senior executive officers (SEOs) and district administrators (DAs) I wanted to interview. One DA took off from leave so that I could talk to him, and a SEO took time off from his weekend. Another SEO photocopied file material without my having to ask. All answered my questions, and some even asked me about Amalgamation. No DA made any self-serving remarks about why he should stay on as district administrator or become the new chief executive officer of the RDC. No DA, CEO or SEO advanced the scenario I most expected to hear, namely, donors need have few worries about giving money to the RDCs as there were no real problems with Amalgamation. They all instead focused on RDC financial viability and related difficulties. Indeed, what would we have had to conclude about their competence had they not focused on such issues? For more on professionalism in African administration, see Leonard (1991) and Roe (1993).

33. Law and bureaucracy go together in Zimbabwe. Here is one observer's description of MLGRUD: "The most influential ministry in terms of administrative structures [for plan-

ning] is the Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development...which is directly responsible for local government. It is responsible for the Provincial Councils and Administration Act, Urban Councils Act, Rural Councils Act and District Councils Act" (Wekwete, 1990, p. 47). Equating council operations to the law is served up in the first sentence from the first page of the draft Trainer's Manual in Ministry of Local Government Rural and Urban Development (1990): "Local authorities are the units or institutions with which local government law concerns itself" (p. i). The Manual's first chapter concludes with a note saying "The law is an ass, BUT IT KICKS!!!" (p. 20).

34. One respondent mentioned the minister's powers as a source of tension and conflict between MLGRUD headquarters and the RDC field staff. RDCs will not want the ministry, in his view, "to dictate" to them over staff and personnel matters, particularly over who RDCs can hire. The tangled link between power and politics in Zimbabwe and other African countries is examined in Roe (1994b). The link is pursued further in a upcoming *Transition* symposium on that article (Roe, 1995).

35. My thanks to Brian Egner for this parallel. An outstanding primer on decentralization and local government in Africa can be found in Egner (1986).

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