The Role of Social Media in Promoting Citizen Participation in Zimbabwe's Urban Local Authorities

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Abstract

Social media is now widely used across the globe having the potential to enhance citizen participation in governance processes. Such platforms include Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp amongst others, to be interrogated in this study. The study sought to examine how these social media platforms can be used to enhance citizen participation in Zimbabwe's urban local authorities using Bulawayo and Harare City Councils as case studies. The two local authorities have a huge footprint on social media. Theoretically, the study was informed by Arnstein's ladder of participation to explore the use of social media in enhancing citizen participation. The researchers purposively and conveniently selected participants that included the residents, councillors and management. The researchers also reviewed and synthesised comments made on different social media accounts of the two cases. Data were analysed thematically where themes were established to deduce meaning guided by the research questions. Findings show that social media presents a huge potential if embraced to enhance citizen participation for it has a wider audience and also its ability to include young, people which is the larger population, using social media. Challenges associated with the use of social media were also established including the high cost of data in Zimbabwe. Also, these platforms do not go beyond the tokenism stage of the Arnstein ladder of Participation making them less effective. Lastly, recommendations are given on how to strengthen the use of social media in promoting citizen participation.

Keywords: Citizen participation, social media, governance, local authorities