

Exploring Stakeholder Participation in Constituency Development Fund Implementation: A Comparative Study of Rufunsa And Lusaka Central Constituencies in Lusaka Province, Zambia

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ABSTRACT: This study explored stakeholder participation in Constituency Development Fund (CDF) implementation across rural Rufunsa and urban Lusaka Central constituencies in Lusaka Province, Zambia, from project identification through implementation. Employing a qualitative case study design grounded in decentralization theory and interpretivist philosophy, the research sampled 27 key CDF beneficiaries and stakeholders through non-probability homogeneous sampling. Data collection utilized in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, with thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-step model. Findings revealed that while stakeholder participation theoretically enhances citizen engagement, practical implementation remains inconsistent and weak across constituencies. Rufunsa demonstrated partial success in promoting stakeholder participation through inclusive communication mechanisms and representation of vulnerable groups. Conversely, Lusaka Central exhibited significant deficits in representation, marked by stakeholder interference, bureaucratic capture, and exclusion of marginalized populations. Effective stakeholder participation necessitates localized knowledge dissemination, capacity-building among community structures, participatory inclusion mechanisms, transparent and ethical engagement of women and youth, and strict adherence to the 2024 CDF Act No. 1, particularly regarding representation of persons with disabilities. These findings contribute to understanding decentralization effectiveness in diverse socioeconomic contexts and offer practical implications for policy reform.

KEYWORDS: constituency development fund, stakeholder participation, decentralization, community governance, rural-urban comparison, Zambia

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Nations worldwide endeavor to enhance quality of life for vulnerable populations, including women, men, children, youth, and persons with disabilities. Development, though widely invoked to assess societal progress, remains conceptually ambiguous and complex (Panth, 2020). The United Nations Economic and Social Council clarifies that development encompasses transforming social structures, accelerating economic growth, reducing inequality, and eradicating poverty (UNESCO, 2018). Despite these aspirations, poverty and underdevelopment persist as critical threats to human well-being globally.

Zambia, among the world's poorest nations, experiences high poverty rates in both urban and rural contexts. Current data indicate that 64.3% of rural populations and 23.4% of urban populations live in poverty (Central Statistical Office [CSO], 2025). Decentralized governance has emerged internationally as a strategic approach to empower local communities and enhance service delivery. Through this framework, the Zambian government envisions community engagement, citizen-driven local development, and inclusive program implementation. Local authorities occupy central roles in implementing the National Decentralization Policy, premised on Zambia's aspiration to achieve middle-income nation status by 2030 (Government of the Republic of Zambia [GRZ], 2022).

Pursuing the vision of bringing resources closer to citizens, the Zambian National Assembly enacted significant legislation in 1995, mandating resource allocation to individual constituencies through Constituency Development Fund (CDF) decentralization. The CDF constitutes a policy instrument allocating public funds to benefit specific political subdivisions, with spending decisions influenced by representatives in the National Parliament. These funds aim to address community infrastructure, social services, and economic development needs (Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development [MLGRD], 2025).

Since its 1995 inception, the CDF has undergone gradual structural and policy transformations. A significant shift occurred in 2021 when the government, under President Hakainde Hichilema, increased funding allocations sixteenfold to approximately USD 1.3

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million per constituency across Zambia's 156 constituencies (Carew-Jones, 2023). This represented the first substantial fiscal decentralization for community-determined spending since independence.

Concurrent with increased funding, governance reforms emerged, including revised CDF Guidelines in 2021 delineating rules for project technical appraisal, funding, and monitoring (MLGRD, 2025). Further reforms ensured timely, accountable disbursement addressing community priorities, including expanded CDF Committees enabling ward-level project identification, Integrated Development Plans addressing district development gaps, and devolved provincial-level project approvals reducing bottlenecks.

Despite guidelines and reforms, on-the-ground barriers impede local development, including weak oversight, political interference, poor project adoption, and limited community awareness and participation, diminishing CDF effectiveness (Muyaloka, 2023). This study examines stakeholder participation levels in CDF implementation through comparative analysis of rural Rufunsa and urban Lusaka Central constituencies to propose strategic reforms.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This study employs decentralization theory as its theoretical foundation. The earliest documented reference to decentralization appears in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1846, from French economist Frédéric Bastiat's **Popular Fallacies Regarding General Interests**, arguing that industrial concentration generates inherent decentralization forces (Schneider, 2019). Bastiat and subsequent scholars conceptualized decentralization as a natural process promoting greater equality.

Following Bastiat, Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville's 1856 work **The Old Regime and the Revolution** extensively discussed decentralization's potential advantages, arguing it facilitated greater citizen participation (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999). Post-World War II, during the Cold War (1947–1991) and subsequent African independence movements (1950s–1960s), democracy and development planning proliferated, with numerous countries implementing decentralization models. The United Nations and World Bank expanded the theory by linking decentralization to good governance, promoting it to improve local capacity and citizen involvement (Rondinelli, 1981; Smoke, 2018).

While no consensus definition exists, traditional conceptualizations derive from Rondinelli (1981, 1999), who defined decentralization as "the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent government organizations or the private sector." This definition involves transferring authority, responsibility, and resources from central government toward localized actors, with depth varying by authority transferred (World Bank, 2024).

A 1999 World Bank study estimated 80–100% of countries implemented some decentralization form, including reforms in Bolivia, India, and South Africa, alongside subsidiarity, devolution, and federalism reforms in developed regions like the EU, UK, and US (Faguet, 2021). To actualize constitutional decentralization, the Zambian government transferred financial and human resources from central to local government through the 1995 CDF, fostering fiscal decentralization (Policy Monitoring and Research Centre [PMRC], 2023).

Decentralization transfers decision-making authority and responsibilities from central to local authorities (Gedvilaite et al., 2020), involving all key stakeholders in resolving local socioeconomic challenges to improve community livelihoods (Rodríguez-Pose & Tijmstra, 2009). Improved livelihoods emerge through stakeholder and community involvement in awareness, participation, and implementation of community-based projects like CDF, designed to foster development and reduce poverty. This study explores CDF effectiveness as a decentralization tool through comparative analysis of selected rural and urban constituencies in Lusaka Province.

2. 0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literature on Zambia's Constituency Development Fund, focusing on stakeholder participation levels.

2.1 Participation and Engagement

Stakeholder participation definitions vary contextually. Chelungusi (2021) characterizes participation as an active process mobilizing communities to engage in neighborhood political and socioeconomic activities, becoming effective participants and beneficiaries of collective decisions. Alternatively, it may be defined as processes whereby local stakeholders including institutions, community members, businesses, NGOs, and community-based organizations collaborate in decision-making influencing municipal development (Howard-Grabman et al., 2017).

Stakeholder participation objectives establish mechanisms integrating local stakeholders and communities into local governance, enabling free articulation of development project perspectives (Rolfe, 2017). Stakeholders encompass individuals, groups, or institutions involved in fund and project identification, management, and implementation, including entities with direct project interactions and specific expertise from civil society, religious organizations, and relevant institutions (Chitwamali & Pollen, 2022). Stakeholders may also include individuals or groups interested in CDF outcomes who, while not directly participating, contribute to identification, management, and implementation. Stakeholder engagement constitutes organizational processes to listen, collaborate, or inform stakeholders through identifying, mapping, and prioritizing them to ascertain effective communication strategies while optimizing resources. Within CDF programs, stakeholders include beneficiaries, community members, politicians,

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media, suppliers, investors, government departments, regulators, and colleagues with vested interests affected by CDF operations and performance. Stakeholders require information on CDF developments, including goals, timelines, and policy changes affecting implementation. They should understand their roles, goals, and responsibilities according to decentralized CDF guidelines, being sufficiently informed to contribute meaningfully and make sustainable decisions enhancing constituencies. Neglecting stakeholder involvement risks project failure, stagnation, and dissatisfaction (Gikombi, 2018).

Stakeholder involvement throughout project cycles maximizes outcomes and ensures success. Best project management practices involve stakeholder engagement in critical closure aspects yielding desired results. Increased stakeholder involvement enhances project effectiveness (Gikombi, 2018). Individual engagement in project activities directly contributes to objective attainment, particularly when objectives align with community needs in community-oriented projects. Adequate project resource allocation ensures comprehensive community needs representation, facilitating full project acceptability. Projects excluding projected beneficiaries from needs-based allocation and identification may fail to secure approval and support. Stakeholder engagement elucidates community needs and integrates project interests and acceptability (Gikombi, 2018).

Stakeholders involved in CDF project allocation—Local Authorities (LA), Constituency Development Fund Committees (CDFCs), and Ward Development Committees (WDCs)—must engage local populations to foster community development. Numerous studies contend stakeholder participation is crucial for effective CDF performance as a decentralization tool.

Chelungusi (2021) examined relationships between decentralization and community participation in Kenya's Kabuchai Constituency CDF initiative, conceptualizing collaborative governance as encompassing public agency and community involvement facilitating successful project implementation. Through qualitative focus group interviews with experienced, knowledgeable CDF participants, the study identified low community participation levels in CDF decision-making, attributed to individual-specific social and institutional (structural) factors impeding effective participation. Structural factors include supporting resources, participation capacity, transparency, and election process integrity. Social factors encompass educational attainment, culture, income level, age, and gender. Low participation undermines CDF project success; as with most public policies, CDF represents a wicked problem necessitating holistic, inclusive solutions through stakeholder collaboration. According to complex adaptive system theory, the study recommended government policymakers establish enabling conditions enhancing participation through increased community awareness and clear communication of goals, objectives, roles, and public expectations. A methodological gap emerged from employing a single approach potentially introducing bias, presenting opportunities for more rigorous research methods.

Kariuki (2019) investigated stakeholder involvement effects on CDF project execution in Kenya's Kiambu Constituency. Four objectives guided the study: determining stakeholder involvement effects on project identification, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Quantitative questionnaires administered to 63 Kiambu Constituency representatives were analyzed using SPSS. Results indicated stakeholder involvement levels across project aspects, suggesting project success links to involvement levels, especially in planning and implementation. CDF project stakeholders include government, project managers, constituents, contractors, Project Management Committees (PMC), CDFCs, NGOs, CDF Boards, and relevant department heads.

Results demonstrated significant stakeholder involvement in project identification, with over 60% reporting high (46%) or very high (14.3%) involvement, suggesting community, CDF committees, religious leaders and institutions, civil society, and NGOs actively participate. Members of Parliament and other leaders advised on constituency development plan project prioritization. Despite CDF effectiveness in these cases, methodological gaps emerged from inadequate research question investigation methods, necessitating improved methodological approaches combining different perspectives.

Conversely, Hampompwe's (2020) study examined CDF impact on rural development, specifically education and health service effects in Rufunsa Constituency, Zambia. Employing mixed methods with questionnaires and interview guides, the study gathered data from residents, administrators, and civic leaders.

Results revealed limited Rufunsa resident involvement in health and education sector planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, indicating community member exclusion as primary CDF project beneficiaries. The study concluded CDF in Rufunsa does not significantly improve health and education service delivery, indicating greater community involvement needs for sustainable rural development. The study recommended beneficiary involvement in project identification, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, necessitating capacity building for planners, policymakers, and civic leaders. A knowledge gap emerged regarding beneficiary-centered participation recommendations facilitating constituency transformation using CDF resources, overlooking other community stakeholders including ordinary members, WDCs, CDFCs, civil society, and religious organizations affected by CDF. Furthermore, Kanyamuna and Zulu (2022) critically examined participatory approaches in development, discussing increasing use of participatory methods like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), arguing for participation benefits including improved efficiency, sustainability, empowerment, and development goal achievement. Conversely, the article addressed participation challenges and criticisms, including empowerment and sustainability issues, power imbalance corrections, and primary usefulness in small projects. The authors recommended future participatory method use, positioning participation as a strong alternative development approach aiding poverty reduction and development goal achievement despite drawbacks. This study's

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importance lies in examining participation from positive and negative perspectives, critically important for understanding stakeholder feelings and perspectives on CDF process roles from planning through implementation.

Studies demonstrate actor and stakeholder involvement is not optional but integral to enhancing projects by ensuring community needs alignment, fostering ownership, and ultimately yielding improved, successful outcomes. These sources indicate excluding stakeholders leads to project failure, stagnation, and stakeholder dissatisfaction. For CDFs to fulfill their intended purpose of facilitating decentralized, community-driven development by funding projects addressing local needs, empowering citizens, and improving constituency living standards, community engagement is essential.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Paradigm and Design

The research approach employed interpretivist paradigm and relative ontology worldview. Knowledge in this study was subjective. Interpretivism's central theme involves understanding the subjective world of human experience (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). People are experts of their own experiences, necessitating concerted efforts to understand research observer and researcher viewpoints. It focuses on understanding meaning behind human behavior and social phenomena (Pulla & Carter, 2018). This paradigm ensures emphasis on understanding individuals and their interpretations affecting social world understanding. These world interpretations become evidence of realities (Krauss, 2005). Individual reality is understood only through experiencing that reality.

To achieve research objectives regarding stakeholder participation in CDF, a qualitative research approach obtained data from primary and secondary sources using case study research design. To explore stakeholder participation in CDF in specific Lusaka Central and Rufunsa constituency cases, the researcher visited participants in constituencies where CDF programs are implemented and policies formulated.

3.2 Research Setting

The study was conducted in Lusaka Central and Rufunsa constituencies in Lusaka Province, Zambia. Lusaka District has an estimated population of 1,747,152, covering 417.9 km², with approximately 510,000 from Lusaka Central constituency (CSO, 2010). The constituency, in Lusaka district's heart, is predominantly urban, including residential and commercial areas. Conversely, Rufunsa constituency is rural, located in Rufunsa District, Lusaka Province, on the province's eastern side with an estimated population of 45,000, covering 9,491 km² (CSO, 2022). Rufunsa constituency exhibits distinct characteristics: unlike Lusaka Central, it is predominantly rural, agriculturally oriented, and less urbanized.

3.3 Collection Methods

Qualitative research methods were employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with participants. The qualitative approach aimed to comprehend rationales and incentives driving stakeholder involvement, providing adaptability and enhanced researcher-participant interaction (Creswell, 2023).

The research population consisted of principal stakeholders engaged in CDF management: decentralization secretariat officers, area Members of Parliament for Lusaka Central and Rufunsa constituencies, MLGRD, Local Authorities (LAs), CDFCs, WDCs, and beneficiaries in both constituencies served as key informants. Additionally, various government policy and planning documents at national and local levels provided valuable stakeholder participation insights.

3.4 Sampling Strategy

Total sample size comprised 27 participants: 18 in two focus group discussions and nine in in-depth interviews. Patton (2025) posits that in qualitative research, sample size is determined by research questions and objectives specifically what needs discovering, what will be useful and credible, and what is achievable within available resources.

In this homogeneous study, data collection achieved saturation during interviews with six key informants—when additional data yielded minimal novel information or indicated no new themes. Accordingly, Francis et al. (2010) recommend ongoing data collection from three additional interviews confirming saturation attainment. The researcher conducted three additional interviews, increasing total in-depth interviews to nine.

Additional samples comprised 18 beneficiaries or groups receiving CDF benefits since 2022, when annual allocations increased over 2000% in Lusaka Central Constituency (Kabulonga and Lubwa wards) and Rufunsa Constituency (Kankumba and Rufunsa wards). Categories included beneficiaries of components such as community groups receiving grants and loans, student/pupil bursaries, and community infrastructure projects.

This research employed homogeneous purposive sampling techniques to select in-depth interview participants. Purposive sampling proves particularly useful when working with small samples and selecting especially informative cases (Patton, 2015). In purposive sampling, the researcher focused on participants possessing study-essential characteristics, especially those involved in CDF programs exceeding one year.

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3.5 Data Analysis

Primary data were collected through qualitative, face-to-face, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Secondary data were sourced from books, reports, and existing statistical sources. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data processing, whereby raw data were coded into categories evolving into specific themes aligned with study objectives.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Ethics

To ensure trustworthiness, dependability, credibility, and transferability, no biases or incorrect reports appeared in this study. All information was reported as obtained from study sites. Ethical approval was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the University of Zambia (UNZA). All actions adhered strictly to ethical research standards outlined by university guidelines. Full compliance ensured approval of ethical clearance protocols before commencing the study.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Background Characteristics of Participants

Table 1 presents background characteristics of 27 participants in Rufunsa and Lusaka Central districts. By sex, 66.6% of participants were male and 33.4% female, indicating lower female participation and lower economic participation and opportunities. These findings correlate with the 2025 World Bank report *Jobs: Unlocking Women's Economic Potential and Boosting Economies*, arguing that globally women's labor market participation was as low as 20% compared to over 75% for men.

Regarding age distribution, the highest percentage was 30–50 years and above (66.6%), while the lowest was aged 20–30 years (33.4%). Concerning education, the highest distribution was secondary (40.7%) and master's degree (26%), followed by no formal education (22.2%) and diploma (7.4%), while the least proportion had bachelor's degree education (3.7%).

Regarding CDF roles, 66.6% were beneficiaries, and 18.6% were technocrats from MLGRD, Rufunsa and Lusaka Local Authorities, and the Decentralization Secretariat. Officers from Members of Parliament in Rufunsa and Lusaka constituencies' represented 7.4%, and 7.4% were CDFC members. Concerning CDF involvement duration, the majority (71.6%) had been involved 1–2 years, 20.1% for 2–3 years, and 8.5% for 3–4 or more years as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Background Characteristics of Respondents

Background characteristics	Freq.	Percent
Sex		
Male	18	66.6
Female	09	33.4
Age		
20 - 30	09	33.4
30 – 50 and above	18	66.6
Education		
No education	06	22.2
Secondary	11	40.7
Diploma	02	7.4
Bachelor's Degree	01	3.7
Master's Degree	07	26.0
Role in CDF		
MPs Office	02	7.4
CDFCs	02	7.4
Local Authority, MLGRD, Dentrization Secretariat	05	18.6
Beneficiaries	18	66.6
Duration involved in CDF		
1 - 2 Years	06	71.6
2 - 3 Years	08	20.1
3 - 4 Years and above	13	8.3
Total	27	100

Source: Field data, 2025

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4.2 Stakeholder Participation in Planning and Implementation of CDF Projects

4.2.1 Institutional Recognition Versus Practical Limitations

Findings demonstrate that stakeholder participation is institutionally recognized but practically limited. At the constituency level, results revealed that the absence of formal offices for councilors and WDCs continues impeding participation and information access. Local leaders typically work informally, hindering community access to updates or feedback on ongoing CDF projects. All participants agreed that lacking permanent offices or help desks restricts public CDF information access, meaning community members rely on personal connections to learn project progress.

The Local Government Association of Zambia (LGAZ, 2022) indicated that lacking formal administrative structures at ward level undermines citizen accountability of representatives and diminishes interaction likelihood. This situation exemplifies what Cheema and Rondinelli (2007) termed "structural decentralization without institutional anchorage," wherein policy devolution is hindered by logistical and infrastructural constraints.

4.2.2 Community Voice and Representation

Regarding whether community voices were heard, Rufunsa study findings offered contrasting views. Some participants reported voices are heard because decisions now originate from communities and are recommended by WDCs. Conversely, others felt unheard because their projects were not prioritized. For instance, participants reported, "Last year, our road was prioritized in meetings but never worked on." Other participants observed that the council hijacks community meetings. Out of 10 WDCs, only one sits on the CDFC that finalizes projects. This suggests representation is partial, with communities participating in project identification but not final decision-making, contradicting participatory decentralization principles (GRZ, 2013).

Conversely, Lusaka Central constituency participants identified WDCs, councilors, and local authorities as main stakeholders, but participation is sporadic. Participants reported, "WDCs engage the community sometimes, but many people shun meetings, thinking they're a waste of time." Others highlighted, "We don't know our leaders very well; we only know the WDC chairperson and councilors." This demonstrates limited community involvement and infrequent local leader communication, especially WDCs, hindering collective community decision-making. It also indicates other committee members or key decision-makers are not communicating or working with the public.

Further, the finding from Lusaka revealed that 70% of CDF beneficiaries originated outside local areas. This suggests elite capture and bureaucratic disconnection from grassroots needs phenomena extensively documented in urban decentralization studies (Cabral, 2011; Rodríguez-Pose & Tijmstra, 2009). Political interference emerges as persistent challenges undermining CDF effectiveness. The observation that beneficiaries are selected from outside local areas indicates that formal participatory structures can be subverted by powerful actors. This finding underscores the necessity of robust accountability mechanisms, transparent selection processes, and external oversight to ensure CDF resources genuinely serve the intended community beneficiaries rather than political patronage networks.

4.2.3 Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

The study found the CDF Act 2022's positive provisions have not facilitated participation for marginalized groups, especially women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Participants indicated representation frequently serves symbolic rather than substantive roles, as committees may comprise individuals not authentically representing target demographics. For example, in one constituency, only the disability association chairperson was disabled; other members were able-bodied, hired primarily to meet inclusion requirements.

In Lusaka constituency, it was reported that "women, youth representatives, and persons with disabilities are not effectively represented in local structures and do not actively contribute to CDF decision-making." These results align with Kaunda and Chikula (2021) and UNDP (2020) observations that affirmative representation in local governance frequently does not result in genuine influence due to inadequate empowerment mechanisms and insufficient civic education. According to stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), this means marginalized stakeholders are passive participants rather than active decision-makers, reducing decentralized governance inclusiveness and legitimacy. Hence, meaningful participation requires decentralization supported by both structural accessibility through dedicated local offices and communication facilities and capacity development in civic awareness, particularly for vulnerable groups. Without these, decentralization risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than dismantling them.

Regarding inclusion of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in decision-making, most Rufunsa participants confirmed inclusion in WDCs and CDFCs. In Lusaka Central, participants reported lacking inclusion of vulnerable groups. This suggests persons with disabilities' needs are not represented in community planning and resource allocation. Repeated denial of grants and loans may also indicate lacking awareness about disability inclusion guidelines, contradicting equity, participation, and non-discrimination principles promoted under national development and the 2024 CDF Act No. 1 (GRZ, 2024). Vulnerable group representation was uneven: Rufunsa reported including women and persons with disabilities, while Lusaka participants reported none existed in their WDCs.

The tokenistic inclusion of persons with disabilities exemplified by disability committees comprising predominantly able-bodied members represents a particularly egregious form of exclusion. This practice violates not only the 2024 CDF Act but also Zambia's

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international commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Authentic inclusion requires not merely nominal representation but meaningful participation where marginalized groups possess genuine decision-making authority and resources to articulate and advocate for their interests.

Further, the gender disparity revealed in participant demographics (66.6% male, 33.4% female) reflects broader patterns of women's exclusion from formal decision-making structures, despite their often-central roles in community development and household welfare. This finding resonates with feminist critiques of decentralization processes that, while ostensibly promoting local empowerment, may reproduce patriarchal power structures without deliberate gender-mainstreaming interventions (UNDP, 2020).

4.2.4 Training and Capacity Building

Regarding training on CDF guidelines, both Rufunsa and Lusaka participants complained about inadequate training, stating, "We did not receive any training. These guidelines are difficult, and they should be translated into local languages." This demonstrates the need for localized knowledge dissemination and capacity-building among community structures. Lusaka participants revealed none received formal training or orientation on CDF guidelines. Orientation absence limits citizens' ability to engage meaningfully, contradicting participatory decentralization principles and stakeholder theory's call for informed participation.

The training deficit identified across both constituencies presents a fundamental challenge to effective decentralization. Without adequate capacity building and civic education, citizens lack the knowledge and confidence to engage meaningfully in CDF processes. The request for guidelines in local languages highlights linguistic barriers to participation—an often-overlooked dimension of exclusion in multilingual developing contexts. This finding suggests that effective decentralization requires substantial investment in adult education, civic literacy, and translation services, moving beyond English-language documents accessible primarily to educated elites.

4.2.5 Decision-Making Processes

Regarding decision-making processes, the Rufunsa study revealed communities identify projects; however, CDFCs and local authorities have final say. Participation was strong at community project identification and voting stages; however, it was weak at approval stages. Findings also revealed that although they meet at community level to identify projects, their WDC does not sit on the CDFC. "This limits our decision-making power," participants noted.

In Lusaka, citizens felt excluded from final decision processes. A participant narrated, "CDF announcements are made at church or council, and decisions are made by the local authority, who do not live in the community. As a result, 70% of approved beneficiaries did not come from the local area." These remarks reveal a top-down approach, with community members excluded from final decision-making, similar to trends observed in Rufunsa. Both constituencies acknowledged WDCs, councilors, and local authorities as main actors but with different engagement levels, disadvantaging WDCs directly connected to local people.

The weak linkage between community project identification and final decision-making authority particularly the limited WDC representation on CDFCs reveals incomplete power devolution. While communities may participate in consultative processes, final resource allocation decisions remain concentrated in higher-level structures potentially disconnected from grassroots priorities. This pattern exemplifies what Smoke (2003) characterizes as "deconcentration" rather than genuine "devolution," where administrative responsibilities are dispersed without commensurate transfer of decision-making authority. Table 2 shows a comparison of stakeholder participation in Rufunsa and Lusaka Central constituencies.

Table 2: Comparison of Stakeholder Participation in Rufunsa and Lusaka Central Constituencies

Stakeholder Participation	Rufunsa (Rural)	Lusaka Central (Urban)
Community involvement	High	Low
Voice in decisions	Active	Marginalized
Vulnerable group inclusion	Women, youth, PWDs represented	No representation
Feedback loops	Regular	Rare

The difference supports claims that rural areas maintain stronger participatory cultures, while urban areas experience fragmentation and low trust problems.

Information Dissemination and Access Study findings from both Rufunsa and Lusaka Central revealed that lacking permanent offices for councilors, CDFCs, and WDCs hinders citizen involvement and information access. Local leaders typically work informally, hindering community updates or feedback on ongoing CDF projects. Citizens cannot easily access CDF information without permanent offices or help desks. The belief that personal connections are necessary to learn project progress problematizes the decentralization plan. LGAZ (2022) indicated that lacking formal administrative structures at ward level undermines citizen accountability of representatives and lessens citizen-representative interaction. This situation also exemplifies what Cheema and Rondinelli (2007) described as "structural decentralization without institutional anchorage," where policy devolution is compromised by logistical and infrastructural constraints.

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Lusaka study findings revealed, "CDF information is accessed from church; this is a problem for people who are not Christians." In Rufunsa, information about application deadlines, project approval, or fund release was not consistently disseminated. Communities rely heavily on churches and WDC meetings, meaning those missing such gatherings remain uninformed. The reliance on churches as primary information channels in Lusaka Central raises critical equity concerns. While religious institutions serve as important community nodes, exclusive dependence on them systematically excludes non-adherents, violating principles of equitable access fundamental to democratic governance and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). This finding underscores the necessity for plural, secular information dissemination mechanisms in diverse urban contexts.

Rufunsa findings revealed that "during CDF sensitization campaigns, the council comes with its vehicle, informing the community the time of application opening and the deadline, and applications are brought to their zones." Rufunsa demonstrates effective stakeholder-oriented governance through inclusive, proactive information dissemination. Lusaka suffers from inadequate stakeholder communication, resulting in exclusion and low awareness. This reflects failure to recognize the full stakeholder spectrum, leading to partial and inequitable participation. These findings are supported by Chizimba (2025), who revealed lack of CDF awareness as a factor affecting community participation. These findings further harmonize with JCTR (2023), noting that lacking information on CDF decisions challenged CDF implementation, as many community members lacked information about CDF implementation in their areas.

Rufunsa maintains a well-organized communication system including school meetings, church gatherings, community gatherings, mobile announcements (council vehicles), and zone-based application distribution. This aligns with Bryson's (2004) assertion that public institutions should communicate with different groups through diverse channels reaching diverse stakeholders. Conversely, Freeman (1988) highlights that stakeholder engagement requires inclusiveness. Therefore, using religious gatherings such as churches for communication privileges one religious group over others, violating equitable access principles and undermining transparency and equity.

The Rufunsa model aligns with decentralization theory's core tenets emphasizing local knowledge, community ownership, and inclusive participation (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Smoke, 2018). The use of multiple information dissemination channels including mobile council announcements, zone-based application distribution, and community meetings reflects adaptive governance responsive to local contexts. This multi-channel approach addresses the information asymmetry problem identified in decentralization literature as a key barrier to effective citizen participation (Faguet, 2021).

4.2.6 Disparities in Vulnerable Group Inclusion

Study findings indicate considerable disparities between Rufunsa and Lusaka Central regarding participation and inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups, especially women, youth, and individuals with disabilities, in decision-making structures. Lusaka Central participants contended that despite the CDF Act (2022) positive provisions, including vulnerable groups remains difficult. Conversely, most Rufunsa participants confirmed inclusion of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in decision-making.

Rufunsa's actions reflect deliberate inclusion of women and other vulnerable groups by using civil society (NGOCC) to support representation. This suggests decentralized structures in Rufunsa function as supported by decentralization theory facilitating inclusive governance and expanding local participation of vulnerable and marginalized populations. Conversely, Lusaka Central exhibits incomplete decentralization, where vulnerable groups, especially persons with disabilities, remain excluded from decision-making. This contradicts decentralization spirit, which advocates for equitable participation and representation of vulnerable groups central to successful decentralization (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Smoke, 2003).

Study findings are consistent with Kaunda and Chikula (2021) and UNDP (2020), who also found affirmative representation in local government often fails to yield genuine power due to weak empowerment systems and lacking civic education. According to stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), this means marginalized stakeholders remain passive participants instead of active decision-makers, reducing decentralized governance inclusiveness and legitimacy. Therefore, meaningful participation requires decentralization backed by structural accessibility through dedicated local offices and communication tools, as well as capacity building in civic awareness, especially for vulnerable groups. Without these, decentralization could worsen existing inequalities instead of dismantling them. According to stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), this indicates disconnection between main stakeholders—citizens, local representatives, and government agencies—that undermines trust and shared responsibility. Therefore, making meetings more accessible to everyone, ensuring equitable information access, and establishing clear feedback mechanisms would all help increase both ownership and fairness in the decentralization process.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This comparative study reveals that CDF implementation in Zambia exhibits significant rural-urban disparities in stakeholder participation effectiveness. Rufunsa demonstrates partial success in promoting participatory decentralization through inclusive communication mechanisms, strategic civil society partnerships, and relatively better representation of vulnerable groups including

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women, youth, and persons with disabilities. However, even in this relatively successful case, participation remains constrained by inadequate training, weak final decision-making authority for grassroots structures, and incomplete information dissemination.

Lusaka Central presents a contrasting picture characterized by weak representation, sporadic community engagement, systematic exclusion of marginalized groups (particularly persons with disabilities), and evidence of elite capture and bureaucratic disconnection from grassroots needs. Despite superior infrastructure and proximity to government institutions, urban fragmentation, weakened social capital, and reliance on exclusionary information channels undermine effective stakeholder participation.

These findings demonstrate that while CDF constitutes an important decentralization tool with potential to enhance local development and citizen empowerment, its effectiveness depends critically on addressing structural, capacity, and governance deficits. Stakeholder participation cannot be assumed to emerge automatically from formal institutional arrangements; rather, it requires deliberate cultivation through accessible information systems, sustained capacity building, inclusive representation mechanisms, transparent processes, and robust accountability frameworks.

The study contributes to decentralization literature by demonstrating that rural-urban contexts require differentiated implementation strategies. Rural settings may leverage stronger social cohesion and more direct community-leader relationships but require greater investment in infrastructure and information technology. Urban settings possess superior infrastructure but require strategies to overcome fragmentation, anonymity, and weakened collective action capacities. Both contexts require sustained investment in civic education, particularly for marginalized groups, and mechanisms to prevent elite capture and political interference.

From a stakeholder theory perspective, the study reveals persistent gaps between normative ideals of inclusive engagement and empirical realities of partial, tokenistic participation. Achieving authentic stakeholder participation requires moving beyond procedural compliance with inclusion mandates toward substantive empowerment where all stakeholders—particularly marginalized groups—possess genuine voice, agency, and decision-making authority.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed to enhance stakeholder participation in CDF implementation:

1. Strengthen Institutional Infrastructure and Accessibility

Establish permanent, accessible offices for councilors, WDCs, and CDFCs at constituency and ward levels equipped with communication technology, information display boards, and dedicated staff. These offices should maintain regular operating hours and provide centralized points of contact for community inquiries, feedback, and grievance redressal. This infrastructural investment is essential to overcome the "structural decentralization without institutional anchorage" problem identified in both constituencies.

2. Implement Comprehensive Civic Education and Capacity Building Programs

Design and implement sustained civic education programs targeting all stakeholders, with particular emphasis on marginalized groups including women, youth, and persons with disabilities. These programs should cover CDF objectives, processes, timelines, stakeholder roles and responsibilities, application procedures, and accountability mechanisms. Guidelines should be translated into major local languages and disseminated through multiple channels including radio, community meetings, mobile vans, print materials, and digital platforms. Special attention should be given to adult literacy programs to enhance document comprehension and confident participation.

3. Establish Plural, Inclusive Information Dissemination Systems

Develop multi-channel information dissemination strategies that avoid reliance on single institutions such as churches. Information channels should include local radio programs, SMS messaging systems, community notice boards at markets and public spaces, mobile council announcements, social media platforms, and regular public forums. Information should be proactive, timely, and accessible to all citizens regardless of religious affiliation, literacy level, or geographic location. Establish feedback mechanisms allowing citizens to verify information accuracy and report communication gaps.

4. Ensure Authentic Representation of Marginalized Groups

Implement and monitor strict compliance with the 2024 CDF Act provisions requiring genuine representation of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in all CDF structures. Move beyond tokenistic inclusion by ensuring marginalized group representatives are selected by and accountable to their constituencies, receive adequate training and support to participate effectively, and possess genuine decision-making authority rather than advisory roles. Establish quotas ensuring minimum representation levels and monitoring mechanisms tracking participation quality rather than mere presence.

Lusaka Central should adopt practices from Rufunsa's model of partnering with civil society organizations (e.g., NGOCC for women's representation, disability rights organizations for persons with disabilities) to support authentic representation and capacity building. Establish dedicated support funds enabling marginalized group representatives to attend meetings, access information, and engage consultants when technical expertise is required.

5. Strengthen Participatory Decision-Making Mechanisms

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Reform CDFC composition to ensure adequate WDC representation proportional to ward populations, moving beyond the current practice of one WDC representative among numerous other stakeholders. Establish clear protocols requiring CDFC decisions to align with community-identified priorities, with mandatory justification when deviations occur. Implement participatory budgeting processes allowing communities to rank priorities and allocate resources through transparent, facilitated deliberation.

Create formal feedback loops ensuring communities receive timely information on project selection rationales, implementation timelines, and resource allocation decisions. When community-identified projects are not funded, provide clear written explanations accessible to community members, creating accountability for decision-makers.

6. Implement Robust Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms

Establish public disclosure requirements for all CDF decisions, including project selection criteria, beneficiary lists, contractor selection processes, budget allocations, and expenditure reports. Publish this information through multiple channels including public notice boards, local radio, constituency websites, and community meetings. Implement community scorecard systems enabling citizens to evaluate CDF performance periodically.

Create independent oversight mechanisms including civil society monitoring committees empowered to investigate complaints, conduct audits, and report findings publicly. Strengthen existing oversight bodies including provincial and national CDF committees with adequate resources and authority to enforce compliance, sanction violations, and address grievances.

Establish whistleblower protection mechanisms encouraging reporting of corruption, mismanagement, or exclusionary practices without fear of retaliation. Implement clear sanctions for political interference, elite capture, and violation of inclusion mandates.

6.1 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study, while offering valuable insights, possesses several limitations warranting acknowledgment. First, the case study design focusing on two constituencies, while enabling in-depth analysis, limits generalizability to Zambia's other 154 constituencies exhibiting diverse socioeconomic, geographic, and political characteristics. Future research should employ multi-site comparative designs encompassing greater constituency diversity to identify patterns across contexts.

Second, the qualitative methodology, while appropriate for exploring stakeholder perspectives and participation processes, does not permit quantitative measurement of CDF development outcomes or statistical inference regarding participation-outcome relationships. Future studies should employ mixed-methods designs integrating qualitative depth with quantitative breadth, enabling both understanding of participation processes and measurement of their effects on development indicators such as poverty rates, infrastructure quality, and service delivery improvements.

Third, the study's cross-sectional design captures stakeholder participation at a single time point, limiting ability to examine temporal dynamics, learning processes, and evolution of participatory practices. Longitudinal research tracking constituencies over multiple CDF cycles would illuminate how participation patterns change over time, which interventions prove most effective, and how institutional learning occurs.

Fourth, while the study examines stakeholder perspectives extensively, it provides limited analysis of financial flows, budget execution rates, project completion outcomes, or value-for-money assessments. Future research should integrate financial analysis with participatory process examination to provide comprehensive CDF performance assessments.

Fifth, the study's focus on stakeholder participation as the primary analytical lens, while theoretically justified, may underemphasize other critical factors affecting CDF effectiveness including technical capacity, political economy dynamics, and broader governance contexts. Future research should employ multiple theoretical lenses including institutional analysis, political economy frameworks, and public management theories to provide more comprehensive understanding.

Finally, the study examines formal participation structures but provides limited insight into informal influence mechanisms, patronage networks, and behind-the-scenes negotiations potentially shaping CDF outcomes significantly. Future research employing ethnographic methods and political economy analysis could illuminate these hidden dimensions of CDF governance.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes valuable empirical evidence and theoretical insights regarding decentralization effectiveness in diverse contexts, offering practical recommendations for policy reform and implementation improvement.

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