

Scaling Community Dialogue in Zimbabwe: Pathways to National Influence

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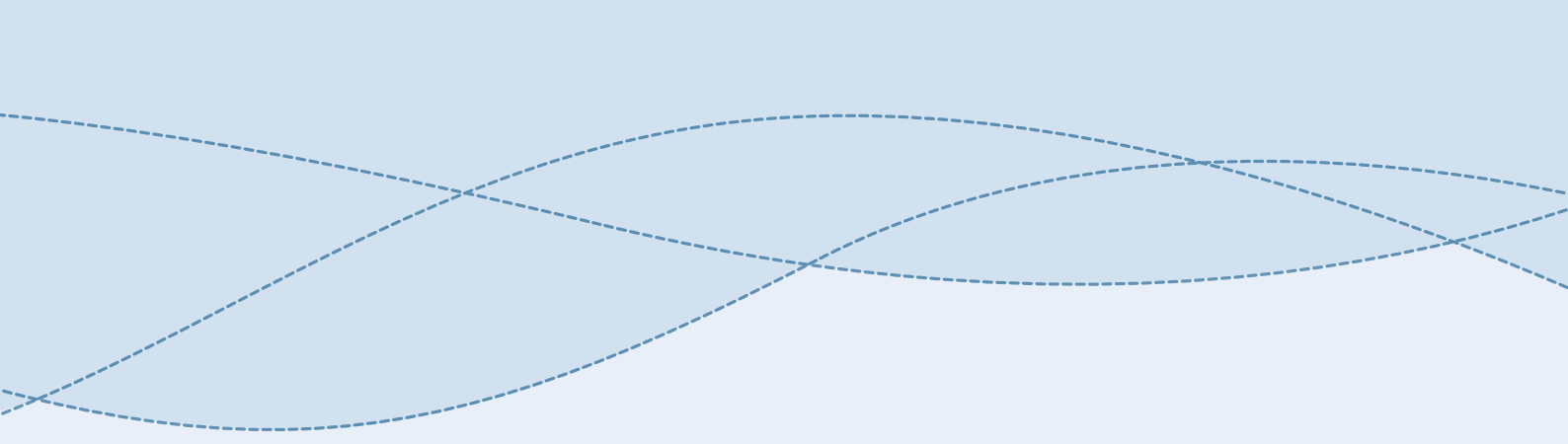


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Introduction

Zimbabwe's enduring economic, social and political challenges are almost always framed as requiring national-level solutions, particularly elite negotiations and nationwide dialogue initiatives. Yet, recent national-level processes have consistently struggled to gain traction. This is due to familiar challenges – political polarisation, limited trust among key actors, and shrinking civic space – but also to a disconnect with the lived realities of Zimbabwean communities.

The situation raises an important question: what if the problem is not an inability to develop effective national processes, but rather the assumption that solutions must originate at the national level?

Across Zimbabwe, communities have long relied on dialogue as a practical tool for managing disputes, negotiating interests, and addressing shared challenges. Across villages, districts and wards, Zimbabwean community leaders frequently use dialogue to manage and resolve conflicts. The culture of dialogue is evident in family structures where aunts and uncles play institutionalised roles as mediators and peacemakers, as well as in the roles of village heads, headmen, chiefs and kings who serve as conveners of community dialogues. Although varied in scope and subject matter, these dialogues exemplify a bottom-up approach in which citizens are not passive participants, but active champions and drivers of change. Yet, local dialogue processes are not systematically connected to one another, nor are they meaningfully linked to national-level decision making. In that regard, the question we address in this paper is whether addressing this dual gap can offer a more effective pathway to national transformation.

To that end, this paper examines 1) the promise of scaling local dialogue initiatives in Zimbabwe, 2) the different pathways for scaling, and 3) the potential risks. In doing so, it draws on key insights, lessons and experiences from IFIT's [Zimbabwe Bottom-Up Platform](#) (Z-BUP): a coalition of local organisations promoting community dialogue as a catalyst for inclusive social, economic and political transformation.

The paper is intended primarily for Zimbabwean civil society and community-based organisations that are leading, supporting or participating in local dialogue initiatives and that are seeking to expand their influence beyond the community level. But the paper's relevance also extends to traditional and religious leaders, local authorities, community networks and others involved in supporting local dialogue processes.

Bottom-Up Dialogue and Its Benefits

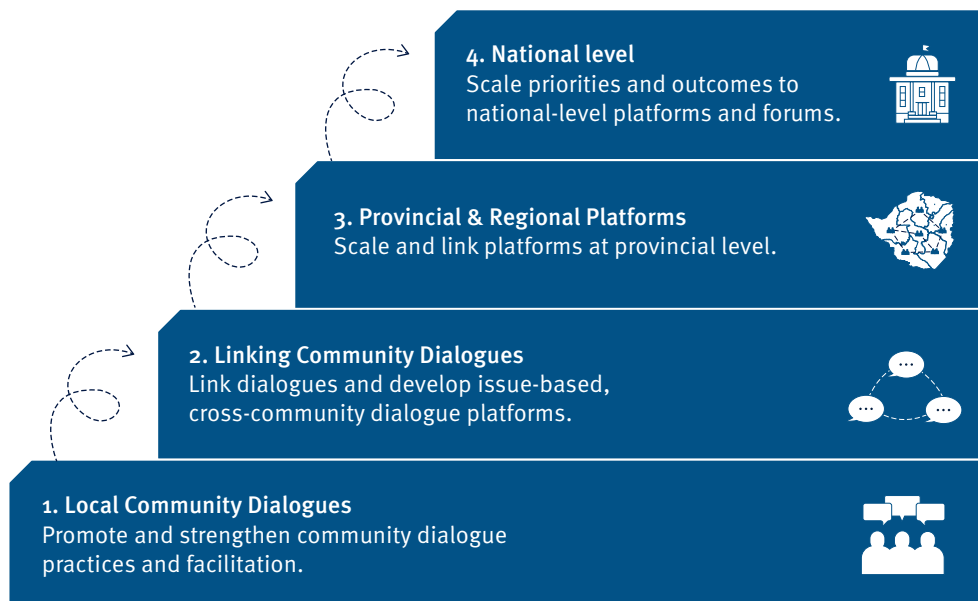
Since 2023, IFIT has worked with local partners to develop a bottom-up dialogue framework for Zimbabwe. Developed through multi-year research on [Promoting Bottom-Up Dialogue in Zimbabwe](#), the framework is based on the premise that effective national-level dialogue and decision making in Zimbabwe must be grounded in the lived realities of communities, using processes that are representative, relevant and responsive to citizens' priorities.

Despite this, local dialogue initiatives in Zimbabwe still lack the broader influence to address structural and national-level drivers of conflict. What this paper argues is that, through scaling local efforts in different ways, Zimbabwean communities can:

- build collective influence by aligning with other communities facing similar issues;
- ensure continuity between local dialogue outcomes and national processes;
- embed community perspectives within national institutions and systems;
- expand the long-term impact of dialogue by linking local action to system-level change; and
- increase the resources and support available for local dialogues.

The logic is 'both/and': without meaningful community anchoring, Zimbabwean national processes risk becoming disconnected from the realities they seek to address; yet without vertical scaling, community dialogue initiatives will remain localised, with limited influence on broader decision-making processes.

Bottom-Up Dialogue Framework



Pathways for Scaling

Scaling is commonly understood as the vertical expansion of individual experiments and processes. This may include, for example, processes that engage local authorities, provincial structures, and ultimately national-level institutions and leaders.

Yet, as outlined in IFIT's *Promoting Bottom-Up Dialogue in Zimbabwe*, scaling can also occur through 'densification': i.e., the building of trans-local platforms and networks through which local initiatives connect and interact horizontally, while remaining grounded in the local processes from which they emerge.

With this in mind, the section below outlines three pathways through which local dialogue initiatives can be scaled beyond the community level. The first focuses on horizontal (translocal) scaling through platforms and networks. The second and third focus on vertical (supralocal) scaling, examining how locally generated ideas, outcomes and leaders can influence institutions, actors and decision-making processes at higher levels.

Box 1: The Role of Zimbabwean Traditional Institutions and Customs

Zimbabwe's traditional institutions, religious structures, and local traditions and customs play an important role in local dialogue efforts, often relying on trusted leaders whose legitimacy helps build participation and trust, as well as helping to carry dialogue outcomes beyond the community level. Traditional leaders have at times convened national *bira* or rainmaking ceremonies with the support of government, illustrating their continued social and cultural influence. Traditional leaders also retain significant convening power within communities, as well as having the ability to help local organisations conduct dialogues with reduced political interference. At the same time, traditional structures and customs can replicate existing power dynamics and exclude certain groups. They should therefore be leveraged as important channels for scaling dialogue, while paying attention to these risks.

Pathway 1: Horizontal Scaling Through Platforms and Networks

Building trans-local platforms and networks can expand the reach and influence of Zimbabwean local dialogue initiatives. The approach focuses on connecting dialogue processes across wards, districts and provinces, strengthening horizontal linkages that allow local priorities to be aggregated and carried into platforms that can engage beyond the community. When effective, it enables dialogue initiatives to broaden their legitimacy and connect with wider national systems and processes.

The approach is resource-intensive, requiring sustained coordination and long-term commitment; and there are real challenges in terms of managing participation, maintaining coherence and preventing fragmentation. Yet, careful design can ensure that growth strengthens rather than undermines effectiveness.

Key steps include 1) organising dialogues between communities facing similar challenges; 2) utilising existing networks and trusted intermediaries to connect dialogue processes across districts and support joint engagement; and 3) opening local dialogue spaces to participants from other communities, allowing them to observe processes, share experiences and learn from one another.

The Mutare Youth Dialogue, a provincial dialogue organised by Youth in Peacebuilding Initiative Trust (YIPIT), [Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust](#) (YETT), and [Community Youth Development Trust](#) (CYDT), provides an example. The dialogue focused on the relationship between youth livelihoods, climate-related vulnerabilities, and the growing prevalence of drug and substance abuse among young people in Manicaland Province. Prior to the dialogue, the three organisations were independently facilitating community-level dialogues in different wards and districts across Manicaland Province. But through the Zimbabwe Bottom-Up Platform (Z-BUP), the organisations were able to share experiences and compare findings. In doing so, they recognised that concerns being raised in different localities were often interconnected and reflected broader provincial trends. This recognition created an incentive for greater collaboration and ultimately led the organisations to jointly convene the Mutare Youth Dialogue: a space where young people from across Manicaland could share experiences, identify common priorities, exchange lessons, and collectively explore responses to the challenges they faced.

The priorities and recommendations emerging from the discussions were aggregated with findings from other local dialogue initiatives and subsequently fed into a “National Multi-Stakeholder Engagement” convened through Z-BUP and supported by IFIT, where national-level stakeholders, alongside citizens and local CSOs and CBOs, participated. This created a pathway through which locally generated experiences and priorities could be considered alongside evidence emerging from other provinces and communities.

The Mutare dialogue illustrates how horizontal linkages can create pathways for influence beyond the community level. Through evidence generated via other dialogue initiatives and through the National Multi-Stakeholder Engagement, the concerns raised by young people regarding drug and substance abuse contributed to growing recognition of the issue as a national policy priority. The discussions then formed part of the broader national conversation that accompanied the development of the National Drug and Substance Abuse Control and Enforcement Agency Bill, demonstrating how networks of dialogue initiatives can help elevate community priorities into wider policy debates.

Pathway 2: Vertical Scaling of Ideas and Outcomes

This pathway works by strategically framing and advancing community dialogue priorities and ideas so that they resonate with national-level actors, processes and debates. Influence at this level can take different forms and may involve shaping the perspectives and positions of key individuals, influencing institutional processes and decisions, or contributing to broader narrative change and public discourse. It can enable local initiatives not only to contribute to how issues are understood and addressed, but also to shape and, over time, reform national-level institutions so they become more responsive to locally sourced priorities.

A useful illustration of how to scale ideas, priorities and outcomes can be found in Zimbabwe's 2020-2021 Anti-Corruption Movement. Rather than relying on a single channel or format, anti-corruption actors responding to locally generated concerns employed a range of creative and complementary approaches to shape public discourse, inform policy debates and influence public debate.

- **Social Media and Strategic Communication:** Social media and other accessible communication platforms helped local organisations, journalists and citizens translate locally generated concerns about corruption into messages that reached wider audiences and shaped public debate. Hopewell Chin'ono's #DemLoot campaign provides a strong example of this approach. The viral song [*Dem Loot*](#) translated allegations of corruption in COVID-19 procurement into a simple and memorable message that linked elite looting to everyday challenges faced by ordinary Zimbabweans, including medication shortages, youth unemployment and poor service delivery. By connecting governance concerns to citizens' lived experiences, the campaign helped elevate corruption onto the national agenda and broaden public demand for accountability.
- **Issue-Based and Human-Centred Storytelling:** Journalists, activists and citizens illustrated corruption through the lived experiences of pregnant women [*unable to access adequate maternity care*](#), communities struggling to [*access clean water*](#), and [*patients turned away from public hospitals*](#) deteriorating healthcare conditions. By placing human experiences at the centre of the conversation, these narratives transformed corruption from an abstract governance issue into a tangible problem, making it easier for broader audiences to understand its impact and engage with demands for accountability.
- **Evidence-Based Reporting and Investigative Journalism:** Investigative reporting can play an important role in scaling local dialogue outcomes by translating complex evidence into formats that shape public debate and influence decision-makers. The Daily Maverick's [*A Study of Cartel Dynamics in Zimbabwe*](#) combined data, investigative findings and case studies to document how political and economic networks operated across sectors, while presenting the costs of corruption in accessible terms (for example, estimating that corruption costs Zimbabwe approximately US\$3 billion annually). By linking these

findings to their local consequences for public services, economic opportunities and state revenues, the report made the scale and impact of corruption more tangible for a broad audience.

Together, these three approaches demonstrate how community dialogue initiatives can translate locally generated ideas, priorities and dialogue outcomes into compelling narratives that shape public debate, influence policy processes and expand their impact beyond the community level.

Pathway 3: Nurturing Leadership

This pathway focuses on individuals who emerge from community dialogue processes and bring local priorities, perspectives and relationships with them into national-level spaces.

Rather than building influence primarily through platforms or ideas, this pathway operates through people, nurturing leaders and supporting their movement across networks, organisations and institutions, while retaining strong links to their communities. In doing so, it creates sustainable avenues for influence that extend beyond individual dialogue processes.

In Zimbabwe, community dialogue processes often act as important incubators of leadership, where individuals build legitimacy, trust and the ability to engage across different groups. As their roles and careers develop, some move into positions of influence within government, civil society or national organisations. In doing so, they carry with them the perspectives, relationships and priorities shaped through community dialogue into wider civic, institutional and national-level spaces.

For this approach to be successful, it requires deliberate and ongoing investment, including identifying, mentoring and accompanying leaders as they evolve, as well as maintaining relationships with them over time. As leaders move across levels and gain influence, there is a risk that they become less connected to community priorities or are shaped by new institutional dynamics or societal polarisation. Continued engagement, feedback and accountability are therefore essential to ensure that their leadership remains grounded and responsive.

The [Zimbabwe National Students Union](#) (ZINASU) provides an example of how leadership can be scaled through local dialogue and representative structures. Rather than relying primarily on formal training, ZINASU develops leaders through practice, beginning with participation in local student representative councils and local dialogue initiatives, advocacy activities and community engagement. As young leaders gain experience, they are progressively entrusted with greater responsibility for representing their constituencies, facilitating dialogue, engag-

ing local authorities and organising collective action around issues affecting their communities and institutions.

This gradual progression enables emerging leaders to build the skills, relationships and legitimacy needed to operate effectively in wider civic and institutional spaces while remaining anchored in the local dialogue processes and constituencies from which they emerged. Former student leaders often remain connected to the organisation, creating opportunities for mentorship, knowledge transfer and continued engagement with new generations of leaders. Many have subsequently assumed influential roles in civil society, academia, business, government and national politics, demonstrating how leadership can be nurtured through bottom-up dialogue processes and progressively scaled into broader national spaces.

Leadership scaling is not primarily about identifying exceptional individuals, but about creating structures and processes through which leadership skills, legitimacy and influence are developed over time while maintaining strong links to the dialogue processes and constituencies from which leaders emerge.

Key practices that dialogue initiatives can adopt to nurture and scale leaders include:

- **Representation:** Create opportunities for emerging leaders to represent the interests and priorities of constituencies rather than simply participate as individuals.
- **Leadership through practice:** Provide meaningful responsibilities that require negotiation, facilitation, problem-solving and decision-making.
- **Mentorship:** Establish relationships between experienced and emerging leaders to support learning and leadership transitions.
- **Progressive responsibility:** Allow leaders to take on increasingly complex roles and engagements over time, starting with local dialogue responsibilities before progressing to broader civic, institutional and policy spaces.
- **Networks and exposure:** Connect emerging leaders to broader civic, institutional and policy spaces beyond their immediate communities.
- **Intergenerational engagement:** Maintain relationships with former leaders who can provide guidance, support and access to wider networks.
- **Grounding in constituencies:** Ensure that leadership development remains connected to the needs, priorities and experiences of the communities or groups being represented.

Risks in Scaling Local Dialogue Initiatives

Pathways for scaling introduce a range of risks that must be actively anticipated and managed. As dialogue processes move beyond the community level, they

become more exposed to political dynamics, competing interests, and increased complexity – all of which can affect both process integrity and outcomes. Recognising and addressing these risks early is critical to ensuring that scaling efforts remain credible, grounded and effective.

Polarisation

In Zimbabwe (as elsewhere), polarisation is a [‘hyper-problem’](#), impeding society’s and the political system’s ability to solve almost any other kind of problem. This is especially evident at the national level, where competition for political power and resources is more pronounced, reducing willingness among actors to engage or consider alternative perspectives. This can constrain dialogue spaces and limit the ability to translate local priorities into shared outcomes. Yet polarisation is not confined to national-level politics. It permeates many aspects of Zimbabwean social, civic and community life and, although often less visible at the local level, community dialogue initiatives must remain prepared to confront and navigate its effects.

The experience of a Zimbabwean CSO working in education and community development illustrates how political polarisation can undermine otherwise successful dialogue processes. Ahead of the 2018 elections, the CSO facilitated community dialogues to support the construction of an Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre at a local public school in one of the districts where it operates. Through these dialogues, community members collectively agreed on which school would benefit first, defined parental responsibilities, and developed a complementary community garden project intended to provide food for learners and supplementary income for parents.

The dialogue process initially generated strong community ownership and participation. Parents organised themselves into volunteer groups, with some contributing labour to the construction of the ECD centre while others began work on the community garden. However, the process was disrupted during the election period, when local political actors reframed participation in the initiative as an expression of support for a rival political candidate. Community members were reportedly warned that continued participation would be interpreted as partisan political alignment.

Participation quickly declined as fear and intimidation spread. Construction of the ECD centre and implementation of the garden project were delayed until after the elections, and even afterwards participation remained fragmented, with some groups excluding others on political grounds. The experience illustrates how political polarisation can penetrate even non-political initiatives, reshaping perceptions of otherwise neutral development processes and undermining trust, participation and collective action.

Approaches that address polarisation when scaling vertically include:

- Making visible to national-level actors that the process is **community anchored** and **issue based**, and that it carries legitimacy, credibility and broad-based support;
- **Sequencing engagements** carefully, starting with **less contentious** issues or smaller groups before expanding to more divisive topics and actors;
- Creating a mix of **formal and informal dialogue spaces**, recognising that trust is often built outside highly visible settings;
- Actively engaging actors across divides through **well-curated and facilitated interactions**, creating opportunities for dialogue between groups that would otherwise not engage directly (see IFIT's [*Toolkit for Constructive Dialogue in Polarised Contexts*](#));
- Investing in **trusted intermediaries** and **'bridge builders'** to sustain communication across divides;
- Framing dialogue outputs in practical, **solution-oriented terms** to increase accessibility across stakeholder groups; and
- Maintaining **flexibility in process design** to adapt to evolving dynamics and manage tensions as they arise.

Institutional Filtering

As dialogue outcomes move from the community level into higher-level processes, they are often reframed in more technical or politically acceptable terms. In this process, local priorities may be filtered, diluted or reshaped, either unintentionally through bureaucratic procedures and reporting requirements, or deliberately through political interests and gatekeeping. This creates a risk that scaling becomes symbolic rather than substantive, with limited fidelity to the perspectives and priorities expressed at the community level.

The experience of the Mutare Youth Dialogue (described in [*Pathway 1*](#)) illustrates how institutional filtering can occur as community priorities move into higher-level policy processes. Participants highlighted the interconnected nature of climate-related livelihood pressures, unemployment, social exclusion and drug and substance abuse among young people. However, as findings from the dialogue were aggregated with evidence from other local dialogue initiatives and carried into provincial and national engagement processes, concerns relating to drug and substance abuse gained particular prominence. While this helped elevate the issue onto the national agenda and contributed to broader policy discussions, there was a risk that some of the wider structural drivers identified by participants would receive less attention. The example demonstrates how local priorities can be selectively amplified, reframed or narrowed as they pass through institutional systems, even when they are not intentionally distorted.

Approaches that address institutional filtering include:

- Ensuring dialogue outputs are **clearly documented, synthesised and communicated** in ways that preserve their **original meaning** and intent;
- Strengthening the **role of intermediaries** or ‘**carriers**’ who can accompany and advocate for dialogue outcomes as they move across levels;
- Creating **direct channels of engagement** between **community representatives** and **higher-level stakeholders**, where feasible, to reduce reliance on intermediated translation;
- Using multiple **transfer pathways** to reduce the risk of distortion through any single channel;
- Building **bilinear feedback loops** that allow communities to validate how their inputs are represented and used; and
- **Communicating and maintaining transparency** in how decisions are made and how local inputs are incorporated.

Box 2: Framework for Transferring Dialogue Outcomes Across Levels

1. **Document:** Capture outcomes in clear, structured formats (e.g., summaries, priority lists, briefs).
2. **Validate:** Share outputs with participants to confirm accuracy and legitimacy.
3. **Package:** Adapt outputs into formats suited to different stakeholders (e.g., policy briefs for decision makers, summaries for media, talking points for intermediaries).
4. **Engage:** Work with trusted actors who can carry and advocate for these priorities across levels.
5. **Facilitate:** Create opportunities for local actors to engage directly with higher-level stakeholders.
6. **Track:** Monitor how outputs are used, referenced and integrated into processes.
7. **Close the loop:** Communicate back to communities, ensuring accountability and sustained trust.

Co-optation

As dialogue processes gain visibility and influence, they may attract attempts by external actors to appropriate their agenda, outcomes or credibility. This can take different forms, including institutional co-optation, where more powerful organisations absorb or reshape locally driven processes, and political co-optation, where political actors seek to align the dialogue with partisan interests. In both cases, there is a risk that the process loses independence, community ownership, and trust.

The experience of the [Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition](#) (CiZC) illustrates the risks that can emerge when networks and platforms created to amplify local voices become increasingly influential, exposing them to pressures from political, institutional and donor actors that can gradually reshape their priorities, strategies and forms of engagement.

Established in 2001, the coalition brought together a broad range of local organisations, including churches, labour unions, residents' associations, women's groups, social movements and human rights organisations, around a shared agenda of democratic reform, accountability and citizen participation. In many respects, it represented the kind of broad-based platform that local dialogue initiatives may ultimately seek to build as they scale their influence beyond the community level (see [Pathway 1](#)).

However, as the coalition's profile and influence grew, it also became increasingly exposed to competing political, institutional and donor interests, generating concerns among some members that the coalition's agenda was becoming increasingly shaped by the need to maintain institutional access, respond to external priorities and preserve relationships with powerful actors, rather than by the collective priorities of its member organisations.

The experience illustrates that successful scaling can increase not only influence, but also vulnerability to co-optation. As dialogue initiatives and platforms engage more closely with governments, donors and other powerful actors, there is a risk that maintaining these relationships gradually takes precedence over accountability to the communities and organisations from which they emerged. Protecting against this requires clear governance arrangements, strong internal accountability mechanisms and a continued commitment to community ownership, independence and the original purpose of the dialogue process.

Approaches that address co-optation include:

- Establishing and **communicating principles** of independence, transparency and non-partisanship;
- **Defining ownership** and **governance structures** for both the process and its outputs;
- Ensuring **broad-based and diverse participation** to reduce likelihood of capture by any single actor;
- **Maintaining the visibility** of the process as **community anchored** and **locally driven**; and
- **Consistently reinforcing** the purpose, scope and boundaries of the dialogue as it scales.

Security

As dialogue processes scale, security risks often increase, particularly in contexts such as Zimbabwe where civic space is constrained. Initiatives addressing sensitive or politically salient issues may be perceived as a threat to existing power structures and individuals, exposing participants, organisers and partners to risks such as surveillance, intimidation or restrictions on engagement. There are also risks related to the protection of information, including the misuse or unauthorised sharing of dialogue outputs.

Approaches that address security risks include:

- Adopting a **human security approach** that prioritises the safety and well-being of participants and organisers above all;
- Establishing **protocols for the protection of confidential information**, documents and communications;
- Carefully **assessing risks** associated with participation and **adapting engagement formats** where and when necessary;
- Investing in **security awareness and training**, including digital, physical and psychosocial safety;
- Maintaining the **flexibility to adjust processes** in response to evolving security dynamics; and
- Being deliberate about **who participates, how they engage, and what information is shared** publicly.

Expectation Inflation

As dialogue initiatives scale and gain visibility, participants, communities and supporting organisations may develop expectations that policy change, institutional reform or improvements in local conditions will follow quickly. Yet influence is often indirect, incremental and difficult to attribute to any single dialogue process, especially in complex and polarised environments such as Zimbabwe. When anticipated changes fail to materialise within expected timeframes, frustration and disillusionment can emerge, potentially weakening participation, trust and support for continued engagement.

The experience of Zimbabwe's [#ThisFlag Movement](#) illustrates the risks of expectation inflation that can accompany the rapid scaling of locally rooted civic initiatives. The movement began in 2016 when Harare-based pastor Evan Mawarire posted a video on social media expressing frustration with the country's deteriorating economy while wearing the Zimbabwean flag around his neck. Although intended as a personal reflection on the economic hardships affecting him and his local constituency, the video quickly went viral because it captured concerns shared by citizens and communities across the country. Through social media and

citizen mobilisation, the movement inspired unprecedented levels of civic participation, particularly among young people who had previously been disengaged from formal politics. It also created a strong sense that sustained citizen action could bring about rapid political transformation.

As public demonstrations and stay-away actions gained momentum, expectations for imminent political change grew significantly. Many supporters believed that the movement would compel meaningful government reforms or even accelerate political transition. However, although #ThisFlag succeeded in raising political awareness, encouraging public dialogue and mobilising citizens around shared concerns, it was unable to translate momentum into immediate structural change. The gap between the high expectations generated and the limited short-term outcomes resulted in frustration and disappointment among many supporters, contributing to a gradual decline in the movement's momentum.

The experience highlights an important lesson for local dialogue initiatives seeking to scale their influence beyond the community level. While successful scaling can generate hope, visibility and public support, it can also create expectations that exceed what dialogue initiatives can realistically achieve, particularly in politically constrained and polarised contexts such as Zimbabwe. Managing these expectations requires combining long-term transformative ambitions with realistic objectives, incremental milestones and transparent communication about what dialogue processes can (and cannot) deliver.

Approaches that address expectation inflation include:

- **Communicating clearly** about the purpose, scope and limitations of the dialogue process;
- **Framing scaling as a long-term process** of influence rather than a direct pathway to immediate policy change;
- Establishing **realistic milestones and intermediate objectives** that allow progress to be demonstrated over time;
- Providing **regular feedback to participants and communities** on how priorities and recommendations are being used and advanced;
- **Celebrating incremental achievements** that contribute to broader change processes; and
- **Maintaining transparency** about challenges, setbacks and factors beyond the control of dialogue participants and organisers.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's social, economic and political challenges are often approached as problems requiring national-level solutions. Yet the limited traction of many national dialogue efforts suggests that sustainable change cannot be achieved through elite processes alone. Effective national dialogue requires stronger foundations within communities and more meaningful connections between local experiences and national decision-making. Scaling community dialogue offers one way of building those connections.

This paper has argued that scaling should not be understood simply as the expansion of local initiatives to higher levels. Rather, it can occur through multiple and mutually reinforcing pathways. Dialogue initiatives can scale through platforms and networks that connect communities facing similar challenges ([Pathway 1](#)), through the promotion of locally generated priorities and ideas into wider policy and public debates ([Pathway 2](#)), and through leaders who carry community perspectives into broader civic, institutional and political spaces ([Pathway 3](#)). Each pathway creates distinct opportunities for influence, while also introducing different risks and constraints.

At the same time, scaling is not inherently positive. As dialogue initiatives expand, they become increasingly exposed to political competition, institutional pressures and competing interests. Community priorities may be diluted, leaders may become disconnected from their constituencies, and organisations may face pressures that weaken their independence or legitimacy. Scaling therefore requires deliberate attention to accountability, representation and the preservation of strong links between dialogue processes and the communities from which they emerge.

For Zimbabwean civil society and community-based organisations, community leaders, traditional authorities and other actors supporting local dialogue, the challenge is not simply to replicate successful local initiatives at larger scales. It is to build systems, relationships and institutions that enable community voices to travel across levels while retaining their legitimacy and integrity. The question is not whether local dialogue should influence national processes, but how this can occur in ways that strengthen both.

Ultimately, scaling community dialogue is not about making dialogue bigger, but about making it matter more. It is about creating a more reciprocal relationship between local and national processes, where national decision-making is informed by the experiences, priorities and knowledge of citizens, and where communities have meaningful pathways to shape the institutions and policies that affect their lives. In a context marked by polarisation, distrust and recurring governance challenges, strengthening these connections may be essential not only for more effective dialogue, but for more inclusive, responsive and sustainable national transformation.

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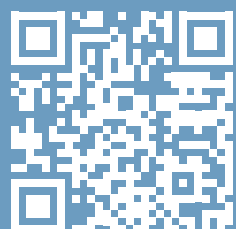
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