



Research Commons

Publisher

Sustainability for Regions

CHALLENGES OF MOVING TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE***Prosper Manavele¹, Dominique E. Uwizeyimana², Alouis Chilunjika³**^{1,2,3} School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, P.O Box 542, Auckland Park, South AfricaE-mails: ¹prospermanavele@gmail.com (Corresponding author); ²dominiqueu@uj.ac.za; ³chilunjika@gmail.com

Received 15 May 2026; accepted 30 August 2026; published 30 September 2026

Abstract. The goal of policy implementation is to translate policy intentions into desired outcomes. However, Zimbabwe has adopted elaborate policies over the years aimed at achieving sustainable development, yet persistent socio-economic challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality persist. Therefore, the novelty of this paper lies in its approach to addressing policy implementation gaps in Zimbabwe's sustainable development trajectory. The paper examines why socio-economic challenges persist despite Zimbabwe's adoption of the Sustainable Development Agenda and national development policies. Hence, qualitative methods were used to examine gaps in policy implementation. Accordingly, government policy documents were analysed, complemented by key informant interviews to gather insights. Findings establish that Zimbabwe's implementation architecture for the Sustainable Development Agenda, including national development policies, is characterised by fragmented governance and a weak alignment with the social and economic indicators of sustainable development. Moreover, policy implementation is fraught with challenges, including limited fiscal space, exclusionary governance, reliance on primary commodities, fiscal indiscipline, corruption and an informal economy. Therefore, the paper formulates recommendations to build a model for transitioning towards sustainable socio-economic development, including governance reforms, enhanced public participation in policymaking, formalisation of the economy and targeting social indicators in policy implementation.

Keywords: policy implementation; social sustainability; sustainable economic growth; sustainable development; Zimbabwe

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Manavele, P., Uwizeyimana, D.E., Chilunjika, A. 2026. Challenges of moving towards sustainable socio-economic development in Zimbabwe. *Insights into Regional Development*, 8(3), 225-239. <http://doi.org/10.70132/c3346324278>

JEL Classifications: O1, O55**1. Introduction**

Poverty, inequality, and unemployment are complex challenges in Zimbabwe's development trajectory. However, improving the welfare of the majority has been the government's policy thrust since independence. One of the earliest policies implemented was Growth with Equity in 1981, aimed at promoting equitable growth through socialist ideology and democratic principles (Zhou & Zvoushe, 2012). Despite achieving a 10% economic growth rate between 1981 and 1982, social spending triggered inflation (Mutenga & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022). Economic performance was affected by increased social spending at the expense of production. However, the inception of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAPs) in the 1990s led to significant shifts in policymaking. ESAPs encapsulated neo-liberal policy prescriptions aimed at cutting government spending and promoting economic growth. However, the anticipated economic growth was not realised. The cuts in social spending, such as health and education, exacerbated social suffering. ESAPs were later abandoned, and a

* The research leading to the results is funded by the University of Johannesburg, School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, South Africa.

successor programme, the Zimbabwe Program for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST), was launched in 1998. However, it was partially implemented.

The turn of the new Millennium witnessed a heightening of social and economic suffering in Zimbabwe. The economy faced an unprecedented downturn marked by reactive policy measures. In 2007, annual inflation skyrocketed to 7 983% (National Budget Statement, 2008). Moreover, 52% of the country's GDP was lost between 1999 and 2008 (Kanyenze et al., 2017). Thus, policy implementation was fraught with challenges emanating from economic depreciation, including inflation. Apart from that, state control over markets aggravated the crisis. A National Incomes and Pricing Commission was established in 2007 to control income and prices. Consequently, price controls led to shortages of basic commodities, and most industries shut down. However, notable macroeconomic stability was achieved in the aftermath of an inclusive government (2009 to 2013), comprising the main political parties: Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the two Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formations. However, the intense ideological rivalry among political parties hindered effective policy implementation (Zvoushe, 2023). Hence, the best course of action to achieve the common public good was not undertaken. However, the government reaffirmed its commitment to a sustainable development trajectory by adopting the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET) in 2013. Despite this, ZIMASSET was largely perceived as a political manifesto rather than a genuine national development policy (Chilunjika & Muzvidziwa-Chilunjika, 2020). The policy thrust was to consolidate power in the ruling party ahead of the general elections. Consequently, implementation faced challenges, including insufficient funding and a lack of stakeholders' buy-in.

In 2018, the government reaffirmed its commitment to the Sustainable Development Agenda by adopting an ambitious blueprint, Vision 2030. The policy thrust aims to transform Zimbabwe into a prosperous upper-middle-income economy by 2030 (GoZ, 2020). This is achieved through medium-term plans: the Transitional Stabilisation Plan (TSP), the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS 1) and the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2). The macroeconomic framework focuses on macroeconomic stability, containing inflation and achieving economic growth. However, socio-economic challenges, including poverty and unemployment, remain elevated despite economic growth. Extreme poverty affects 42% of the population (WFP, 2026). Moreover, the economy is extremely informalised, hindering the creation of decent work opportunities and broad-based economic growth. Therefore, this paper examines why socio-economic challenges persist despite Zimbabwe's policy commitments towards promoting sustainable development.

Accordingly, the paper aims to: (1) analyse the implementation architecture of the Sustainable Development Agenda, (2) examine the alignment of Zimbabwe's national development policies with sustainable economic growth, (3) evaluate the integration of social sustainability, and (4) formulate actionable recommendations for enhancing policy implementation to achieve sustainable socio-economic development. Concomitantly, the paper builds a model for transitioning towards sustainable socio-economic development, using formulated recommendations.

2. Review of Literature

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a complex phenomenon (Sachs et al, 2025). Therefore, this section delineates a framework for analysing the complex trajectory of sustainable socio-economic development in Zimbabwe. It illustrates the theoretical relationship among key concepts under study, including policy implementation, sustainable economic growth, and social sustainability. Policy implementation translates policy intentions into desired outcomes. However, effective policy implementation relies on good governance mechanisms that foster a collaborative, iterative policy process. Hence, effective policy implementation is a panacea for achieving complex, sustainable socio-economic development outcomes, including employment

creation and the eradication of poverty and inequality. On the contrary, poor policy implementation hinders progress toward sustainable development outcomes.

Impact of Policy Implementation on Desired Policy Outcomes

Policy implementation is a political process of achieving policy goals (Sager et al., 2024). This involves translating policy intentions into desired outcomes to address public problems. Therefore, effective policy implementation must tackle the complex challenges of development. Poverty and inequality are complex challenges that prompt governments to craft elaborate policies aimed at eradicating them. Hence, policy implementation must translate policy objectives into sustainable development outcomes. Effective policy implementation largely depends on a government's ability to transform policy objectives into desired outcomes (Uwizeyimana, 2024). Therefore, policy implementation is fundamentally a political process that influences development outcomes. The political will of governments to act or refrain from action is crucial for effective policy implementation. This makes policy implementation a complex issue. Most developing countries struggle to translate their policy intentions into desired outcomes. While policy design is important, effective implementation is crucial for realising policy goals. In fact, policy implementation can sometimes become a graveyard for even the most well-conceived policies. This exhorts governments to invest more in knowledge and other resources to ensure policy success. Moreover, policy design and implementation are intertwined. Policy design flaws affect the success of policy implementation. Therefore, policies must have clearly defined goals and objectives. Policies must be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) to promote successful implementation. Furthermore, policy goals are crucial for translating intentions into desired outcomes (Glass & Newig, 2019). Policy implementation must also prioritise human well-being as the primary objective of development because true development is people-centred and must transform people's livelihoods. As such, policy implementation must be bottom-up and inclusive rather than purely technical. The lack of public input in policy implementation often leads to misaligned priorities, which hinder sustainable development outcomes. Exclusionary governance is detrimental to development (Masunungure & Zvoushe, 2023). However, good governance is crucial for translating policy intentions into desired outcomes.

Interplay of Good Governance and Policy Implementation

Simply put, governance denotes a comprehensive system of rules, institutions, practices, and processes by which a society manages and allocates its resources. This involves various actors, processes, structures and agencies engaged in crafting and executing political decisions. Notably, public institutions are key actors in governance, conducting public affairs, managing public resources, and setting policy priorities to address public problems. Thus, a government's ability to establish norms, institutions, and a legal and policy framework that empowers individuals to participate in policy decisions and hold leaders accountable is crucial for addressing public problems. However, governance institutions don't operate in a vacuum; they need supporting principles to foster their effectiveness in responding to public problems. Accordingly, good governance provides a framework for promoting the efficiency of public institutions to address public problems. Good governance constitutes the principles, tactics and standards adopted by a government to build political will to address societal problems (Olowu, 2025). The core principles of good governance include accountability, transparency, responsiveness, participation, inclusiveness and equity (Omri & Ben Mabrouk, 2020). These principles foster inclusiveness in policy implementation to ensure that it is inherently consultative, which is pivotal for achieving sustainable development. The practice of good governance fosters an environment conducive to effective policy implementation, whereas poor governance leads to implementation gaps. Moreover, strong institutions are built on good governance, contributing to enhanced human well-being (DCAF, 2021). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 aims to create effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions that foster sustainable development. Hence, good governance, policy implementation and sustainable development are interwoven.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development aims to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Therefore, the goal of sustainable development is to achieve human development while also nurturing the planet's capacity to support life. This approach integrates the principles of environmental protection and economic development. However, the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda reflects a collective call to action to build a resilient, just, and prosperous world for all (Sachs, 2015). Accordingly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. Therefore, addressing the world's complex problems, including poverty, must integrate strategies that balance economic growth and social sustainability while safeguarding the environment. Economic sustainability is rooted in economic growth; however, economic growth does not guarantee improvement in people's well-being. Therefore, sustainable economic growth goes beyond traditional measures of development to emphasise the advancement of human capacities and capabilities for well-being. This includes poverty eradication, job creation, and the provision of health and education. Apart from that, social sustainability aims to enhance people's capacities to realise their full potential. The elements of social sustainability include inclusion, equity, cohesion, resilience, empowerment and participation, which create an enabling environment for people to meet their needs. Meanwhile, environmental sustainability aims to conserve the environment while also advancing economic and social objectives. Accordingly, sustainable development is a complex phenomenon that relies on effective policy implementation to balance the social, economic and environmental objectives of human well-being.

Social Sustainability

Social sustainability refers to a development process that enables people in a given community or society to be part of it and benefit from it (Barron et al., 2025). The main elements of social sustainability include social cohesion, inclusion, equality, resilience, quality of life, community resilience and process legitimacy. Thus, social sustainability serves as an endpoint of exclusion, ensuring that those at risk of poverty and other disadvantages can access the opportunities and resources necessary to realise their full potential (Paraschiv et al., 2021). This promotes productive, cohesive societies, allowing people to cooperate and establish the basic social functions that underpin prosperity. However, exclusion is detrimental to social cohesion and inclusive development. Inclusive societies are built on promoting people's access to basic services and meaningful participation in development. Therefore, encouraging people's participation in policy implementation empowers them to influence decisions on issues that affect their daily lives, fostering inclusive development. People's participation builds social capital and a sense of local ownership, which drives sustainable development (Nwachi, 2021). Sustainable development is an inclusive process that aims to leave no one behind. Hence, resilient societies enhance people's ability, particularly the poor and marginalised, to withstand shocks and protect cultural integrity.

Furthermore, social inclusion promotes equal opportunities for all to participate in development fully. Accordingly, social inclusion is categorised into socio-cultural, political, and economic. Socio-cultural inclusion enables groups in society to participate in decision-making, thereby fostering social trust in the implementation of policies. The political aspects of social inclusion focus on bridging the gap between national agendas and local needs. When institutions and political powers hold authority over decision-making, it can lead to misaligned priorities in policy implementation. However, public participation in decision-making enhances policy legitimacy and builds public trust in government, both of which are essential for achieving sustainable development.

In contrast, exclusionary governance does not empower marginalised individuals to make decisions on issues that impact their daily lives. As such, the goal of social inclusion is to reduce inequalities, eliminate any forms of exclusion and discrimination and achieve social justice and cohesion (Dugarova, 2015). Government policies must embrace meaningful participation, universal social protection, and the social and solidarity economy to enhance sustainable socio-economic development.

Sustainable Economic Growth

Traditional economics utilised productivity and factor endowments in determining the growth and development of economies. However, productivity alone does not capture income distribution and how people meet basic needs (Kreinin & Aigner, 2022). People are the real wealth of nations, and the goal of development is to improve human well-being through enabling people to realise their full potential and live productive lives (UNDP, 1990). Utilising real per capita GDP as an absolute measure of development omits the indicator of living standards. Economic metrics are a means to an end, not an end in themselves, for improving human well-being. Sustainable development integrates the dimensions of economic growth and human well-being. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite statistic used to measure quality of life and human well-being. HDI focuses on life expectancy, educational attainment, and GDP per capita. This integrates non-economic metrics into the human development framework. HDI informs the achievement of human development goals and the design and implementation of economic development policies. The intersection of economic growth, health, education, and the environment is vital for achieving sustainable development (Kamran et al., 2022). Therefore, sustainable economic growth aims to deal with the complex challenges of inequality and poverty in human development. Governments are exhorted to develop appropriate policies to create equal opportunities for all and ensure that all can contribute to and benefit from economic growth (Widianingsih et al., 2024).

Furthermore, employment quality is another key dimension of sustainable economic growth. Accordingly, SDG 8 aims to promote inclusive growth, decent work and productive employment for all. The quality of employment affects the progress of human well-being. The deficit in decent work opportunities increases workers' vulnerability and perpetuates poverty. Figure 1 illustrates the four pillars of sustainable economic growth.



Figure 1. Four pillars of sustainable economic growth.

Source: UNCTAD (2022)

The four pillars of sustainable economic growth include the economy, living conditions, equality and the environment. Economic indicators include Gross Domestic Product (GDP), national income, purchasing power, employment, and trade. Social and economic standards, including health and education, measure indicators of living conditions. Moreover, equality is assessed through labour participation, income inequality, school enrollment, political participation, and gender equality. The environmental dimension of sustainable economic growth encompasses the protection of natural capital. Accordingly, developed countries generally achieve higher levels of sustainable economic growth than developing countries. Luxembourg, Iceland and Norway are amongst the top-ranked countries in sustainable economic growth, whilst Ethiopia is ranked the lowest (UNCTAD, 2022). High levels of inequality are the major impediments to sustainable economic growth and the eradication of poverty.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in two interconnected theoretical perspectives that inform the analysis of policy implementation and the achievement of sustainable socio-economic development. These include the governance theory and the human development approach.

Good Governance Theory

Good governance refers to public administration processes that maximise public interest (Kotnik et al, 2020). Therefore, this paper employs good governance theory to examine the importance of effective institutions in policy implementation. The concept of good governance originated from the World Bank's policies, which were tailored for developing countries in the 1980s (World Bank, 1992, 2000, 2024). It was believed that significant economic failures in these countries stemmed from poor governance. Thus, governance refers to the exercise of power by a government in managing a country's social and economic resources. Good governance promotes sound development, while poor governance hinders it. Accordingly, good governance comprises a set of principles including responsiveness, consensus, accountability, transparency, participation, and equity. Embracing these principles is the core of governance, supporting a well-functioning government in achieving sustainable development outcomes. Hence, sustainable development is facilitated by effective institutional and procedural mechanisms that represent the public interest. However, weak governance affects a government's macroeconomic performance and its ability to pursue sustainable growth (Newiak, 2022) credibly. Niger is a typical country in Sub-Saharan Africa, where weak governance has hindered the achievement of sustainable development outcomes (Sun et al, 2025). Hence, good governance theory establishes fundamental principles that inform an efficient and effective public sector in development management.

Human Development Approach (HDA)

According to the UNDP (1990), the focus of human development is to enlarge people's choices for a decent standard of living. The objective of human development is to create an enabling environment that enhances people's capacity to live productive lives. This includes a long and healthy life, education, a decent standard of living, political freedom, guaranteed human rights and self-respect. Income and wealth are only means to an end, not ends in themselves. Therefore, policymaking must not focus solely on economic growth. Economic growth does not always trickle down to promote inclusive growth. The eradication of socio-economic challenges, including poverty and unemployment, relies on deliberate policies rather than trickle-down effects. Employment creation and poverty eradication are means to productive lives, not a result of economic growth. Sustainable development integrates the social, economic and environmental dimensions. Paradoxically, Zimbabwe's macroeconomic policy framework is focused on stabilisation without integration of social indicators.

The above theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analysing why elaborate policy designs fail to transform human well-being in Zimbabwe. Poverty, unemployment and inequality remain elevated despite the adoption of comprehensive socio-economic policies. The theoretical foundations of good governance and the human development approach illuminate pathways to strengthen policy implementation and achieve sustainable socio-economic development in Zimbabwe.

4. Study Design and Methodology

The nature of the research problem under investigation determines the selection of a research approach. Therefore, this study employs a qualitative research approach to examine why socio-economic challenges persist despite the adoption of elaborate policies in Zimbabwe. Qualitative research helps explore and understand the meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). This offers in-depth insight into the complexity of sustainable development and facilitates a nuanced understanding of policy implementation dynamics. Documentary analysis of key government policy documents and key informant

interviews were utilised to gather insights. The key government policy documents reviewed include Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), the Transitional Stabilisation Program (TSP), the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS 1), the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2) and Budget statements. However, reliance on government policy documents is a limitation for the study as they are prone to bias, tending to portray successes while downplaying failures.

To counter the limitations of documentary analysis, key informant interviews were conducted with policy analysts to generate insights into the dynamics of policy implementation and the achievement of sustainable development outcomes in Zimbabwe. Moreover, the paper adheres to ethical standards, providing an impartial synthesis of available information and maintaining academic integrity. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy- Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg.

5. Implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda and National Development Policies in Zimbabwe

Institutional architecture for implementing the Sustainable Development Agenda in Zimbabwe

The SDGs secretariat under the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare coordinates the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Zimbabwe. Implementation of the SDGs takes a holistic, multi-sectoral approach as illustrated in Figure 2.

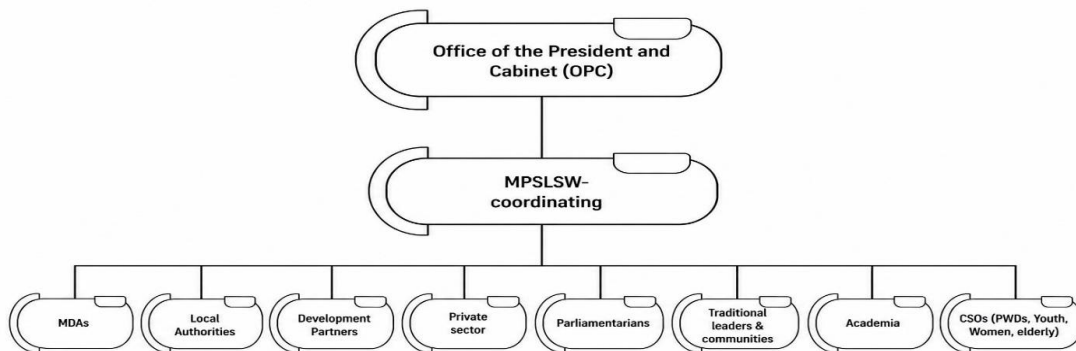


Figure 2. SDGs Implementation Structure in Zimbabwe

Source: Government of Zimbabwe, Voluntary National Review (2024)

The comprehensive approach to implementing SDGs in Zimbabwe aims to promote both vertical integration and horizontal coordination across different sectors and levels of governance. However, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare (MPSLSW), coordinating the SDGs, does not play a leading role in formulating national development policies. The Ministry of Finance, Economic Development and Investment Promotions plays a leading role in formulating national development policies, particularly the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2). This limits the SDGs secretariat's role in effectively coordinating and mainstreaming SDGs in government policies. Consequently, the weak alignment of domestic policies with the Sustainable Development Agenda impedes the achievement of sustainable development outcomes. Apart from that, stakeholders, including development partners, are limited to consultation and technical support, without a stake in higher-level decision-making.

The Alignment of National Development Policies with Sustainable Economic Growth

Zimbabwe's macro-economic policies are aimed at stabilisation, containing inflation and promoting economic growth. However, the economy has been in flux, with elevated poverty and unemployment rates. The government adopted Vision 2030, a framework aimed at achieving a prosperous upper-middle-income economy through medium-term plans, including the Transitional Development Plan (TSP), the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS 1) and the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2). The Transitional Stabilisation Plan was a short-term policy intervention aimed at addressing pressing economic challenges. The primary focus of TSP was to stabilise the macroeconomic environment, promote a private sector-led economy, address infrastructure gaps, and achieve quick wins to stimulate growth (GoZ, 2018). However, the adoption of TSP was not participatory; key stakeholders were not consulted (LEDRIZ, 2020). The lack of stakeholder participation hindered the success of implementation. Although the TSP was focused on addressing macroeconomic challenges, it overlooked the equally important social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Sustainable development is a holistic process which integrates economic, social and environmental dimensions. Moreover, stipulated mechanisms for fiscal and monetary discipline were not enforced. In 2020, the Treasury made various direct payments totalling US\$22,024,406 on behalf of Ministries without supporting evidence (OAG, 2020). This reveals weak governance practices that undermine the efficiency of service delivery and national economic performance. The lack of fiscal prudence impedes efficient resource allocation, hindering prospects for improving people's well-being.

However, the adoption of NDS1 and NDS2 in 2020 and 2025, respectively, represents the government's commitment towards a middle-income economy by 2030. Despite this, the government's primary focus is on economic stabilisation without deliberately integrating social indicators. Thereby limiting the achievement of sustainable development outcomes. Consequently, Zimbabwe has achieved a single-digit inflation since 1997, but poverty and unemployment remain elevated. Moreover, the economy relies on primary products, limiting manufacturing growth. Manufacturing growth is crucial to promote structural change and broad-based economic growth (Baymul & Sen, 2020). However, agriculture and mining are considered the primary drivers of socio-economic transformation in Zimbabwe. Agriculture receives more budgetary allocations than industrial growth and manufacturing. The 2026 National Budget allocated ZiG26.8 billion to agriculture, compared with ZiG459.8 million to industry (National Budget Statement, 2025). 70% of agricultural produce is exported in raw form. This limits beneficiation and broad-based economic growth. There is a need to promote value addition and shift from primary agriculture to promote structural change. Despite government efforts to modernise agriculture and boost production, including the Pfumvudza/Intwasa initiative, productivity is largely subsistence and less diversified. Apart from that, agriculture contributes a significant share of employment. According to the 2025 Second Quarter Labour Force Survey Report, agriculture accounts for 24.8% of national employment, whilst manufacturing accounts for 7% (ZIMSTAT, 2025a,b). This constrains the creation of decent work opportunities; agriculture does not provide decent employment compared to manufacturing. This precipitates poverty and hinders inclusive growth. Moreover, economic informalisation is a challenge limiting the creation of decent work opportunities in Zimbabwe.

Integration of Social Sustainability

The principle of "leaving no one behind" is an integral part of Zimbabwe's national development policy framework, including NDS 1 and NDS 2. However, Zimbabwe has a long-standing history of exclusionary politics, in which public consultations often serve as mere formalities to validate decisions rather than genuinely engage key stakeholders (Masungure & Zvoushe, 2023). The national budget remains a technical exercise which often fails to align with people's actual needs. There is inadequate dissemination of information about budget consultations, and most people, particularly those in rural areas, remain sidelined in national budgeting.

Furthermore, the scale of Zimbabwe's informal economy presents a significant challenge to macroeconomic gains. 76.1% of establishments in Zimbabwe are informal (Zimbabwe Economic Census, 2025). Therefore, the

prevalence of the informal sector leaves many workers in vulnerable employment, which exacerbates poverty. The informal sector is neither registered nor does it pay taxes, undermining the government's tax revenue base and leading to fiscal deficits. Fiscal deficits shrink the resources available for social sectors. Moreover, efforts toward gender equality in Zimbabwe's political economy remain more symbolic than genuinely empowering. Despite the government enacting legislation to improve women's participation in politics, such as a constitutional quota system, these measures are largely symbolic and fail to achieve genuine representation. Women remain underrepresented on key decision-making platforms, despite making up 52% of the national population. The 2013 constitution established a gender quota, reserving 60 parliamentary seats for women through proportional representation to address the historical underrepresentation of women. However, the gender quota has only increased women's numerical presence in politics, but they remain underrepresented in political leadership positions. Hence, the continued underrepresentation of women hinders their active participation in development. Women must have a voice in political leadership to represent their interests. Therefore, the traditional barriers to women's representation should be dismantled to promote genuine empowerment.

6. Policy Implementation Challenges

Exclusionary Governance

Despite government commitments to social equality, significant barriers persist, limiting the participation of marginalised groups in development. Youths, women, and people with disabilities continue to face structural barriers that limit their participation in national development processes. While gender has been mainstreamed in legislative frameworks, including gender quotas, implementation gaps remain in translating these formal commitments into tangible outcomes. Moreover, poverty and inequality further constrain women's participation in development processes. Women constitute a significant portion of Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). In 2025, females accounted for 57.4% of Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training compared to 40.4% among their male counterparts (Zimbabwe Second Labour Force Survey, 2025). Hence, marginalised groups, particularly women, often lack the resources and agency necessary to advocate for their interests and needs effectively.

Fiscal Indiscipline and Corruption

Corruption is a structural barrier to development which undermines the functionality and legitimacy of institutions, affecting the quality and availability of public services (GoZ, 2021). Moreover, fiscal indiscipline undermines the efficiency of government policies and programmes, due to weak governance and inadequate enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance. The Office of the Auditor General's (OAG) yearly reports show a grim picture of fiscal indiscipline. However, there are no effective enforcement mechanisms in place to ensure compliance or to prosecute offenders. Despite the establishment of the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) to prevent and combat corruption. The ZACC has been criticised for a 'catch-and-release' approach. High-profile offenders are often not effectively prosecuted as much as low-profile offenders. Zimbabwe remains ranked as a highly corrupt country on the Corruption Perceptions Index, with a score of 22 for perceived levels of public sector corruption (Transparency International, 2026:5).

Limited Fiscal Space

Limited fiscal space is a significant challenge to achieving the UN 2030 Agenda in Zimbabwe (GoZ, 2017). Zimbabwe's economic challenges are significantly constraining policy implementation. The country has experienced persistent hyperinflation, currency instability, and limited fiscal space, reducing the resources available for development programs. Macroeconomic challenges lead to fiscal pressures, limit funding for programs, and reduce the purchasing power of the resources allocated to them. In 2024, the national budget projected revenue of Z\$53.9 trillion against expenditure of Z\$58.2 trillion, resulting in a budget deficit of Z\$4.3 trillion (Budget Statement, 2025). Moreover, the country is in debt distress, limiting fiscal space for social spending. At the end of September 2025, Zimbabwe's public and publicly guaranteed debt stood at USD 23.4

billion (GoZ, 2025). The debt service payments made by the Government of Zimbabwe in the 2025 fiscal year exceed the budgetary allocations for industry, tourism and mining. With limited fiscal space, the government relies on external support from development partners to bridge the development finance gap. However, the decline in global Official Development Assistance (ODA) presents challenges for Zimbabwe's development finance. In 2023, development assistance to Zimbabwe declined to USD 549.8 million, down from USD 638.8 million in 2022 (GoZ, 2024). Between January and September 2025, Zimbabwe received USD 386.1 million in development assistance against a target of USD 500 million (Budget Statement, 2025). Hence, reliance on development partner support has become unsustainable for bridging Zimbabwe's development financing gap.

Reliance on Primary Commodities

Zimbabwe's economic growth relies on primary factors, which are problematic for sustainable socio-economic development. Agriculture remains the mainstay of Zimbabwe's economy, and it is primarily subsistence, and productivity is significantly affected by climatic shocks. In 2019 and 2020, the GDP contracted by 6% and 4%, respectively, due to an El Niño-induced drought that severely impacted agricultural production and manufacturing (GoZ, 2020). Therefore, the government must modernise agriculture and transition from primary production to manufacturing to promote growth. Apart from that, critical minerals, including gold and lithium, are largely exported in raw form, limiting beneficiation and broad-based economic growth. Value addition promotes manufacturing growth and broad-based economic growth. Moreover, most mining ventures are informal, small-scale operations that engage in environmentally harmful practices, thereby undermining the sustainability of the mining sector and its contribution to broad-based economic growth. The natural environment is finite, and the exploitation of natural resources must balance the objectives of social, economic and environmental sustainability. However, the prevalence of poverty forces people to depend on their immediate environment for survival. This has led to the proliferation of informal small-scale mining in Zimbabwe.

Informalised Economy

The informal sector is a livelihood strategy for a significant portion of Zimbabwe's population. However, it presents a significant challenge to achieving sustainable socio-economic development. The informal sector does not pay tax, which constrains the government's tax revenue base. Moreover, informal employment is precarious; it lacks job security and social security, which constrain the creation of decent work opportunities. Although the informal sector serves as a coping mechanism against economic challenges, working conditions fall short of decent standards. Hence, the prevalence of the informal economy in Zimbabwe indicates structural challenges in generating decent work opportunities. The deficit of decent work perpetuates poverty and constrains the achievement of broad-based economic growth. Consequently, Zimbabwe experienced a 6% annual growth rate in 2025, but a significant portion of the population remains in poverty.

7. Policy Recommendations

Governance Reforms

There is a need to prioritise governance reforms that strengthen institutional capacity and accountability to promote effective policy implementation in Zimbabwe. This includes investing in the technical and managerial capabilities of public institutions at both national and sub-national levels, with a particular focus on implementation agencies. The establishment of the dedicated SDGs Secretariat represents a positive step which should be adequately resourced to coordinate SDG implementation. The SDGs secretariat must be empowered to participate effectively in implementing national development policies. Furthermore, the government must enhance transparency and accountability by regularly reporting to the public on the progress of national development plans. Moreover, the Whole-of-Government Performance Management System for NDS1 and NDS2 monitoring represents a good practice that should be strengthened. Furthermore, anti-corruption efforts should be strengthened through continued capacity-building for institutions such as the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC), the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA), and the Office of the Auditor General (OAG).

Stakeholders Buy-In in Policymaking

The government must enhance public participation in policymaking to promote social cohesion and policy legitimacy. The lack of public participation leads to misaligned and misplaced priorities, hindering inclusive development. Technical policymaking often serves the interests of a few while excluding the majority from decisions that affect their daily lives. Therefore, the national budget must evolve from a technical process to one that captures public interest. This enhances the effectiveness of government policy interventions in addressing public problems in Zimbabwe.

Formalisation of the Economy

The informalisation of the economy is a significant challenge limiting broad-based economic growth in Zimbabwe. The informal sector fails to create decent work opportunities and support sustainable economic growth, thereby perpetuating poverty. Furthermore, the informal economy undermines the government's tax base, leading to fiscal deficits that constrain resource allocation to critical social and economic sectors. Therefore, the informal economy must transition into the formal economy to enhance its contribution to sustainable socio-economic development, including decent work and contribution to the national fiscus. However, the informal sector should not be treated as a threat to the formal sector but must be productively integrated into the formal economy. This goes beyond taxation by addressing barriers to its growth and providing incentives to attract formalisation.

Targeting Social Indicators in Policy Implementation

Zimbabwe's macroeconomic framework is focused on stabilisation, containing inflation and promoting economic growth. This is envisioned to trickle down and transform socio-economic development. However, eradicating social challenges, including poverty and unemployment, requires deliberate policies that promote people's well-being. Despite achieving positive economic growth, poverty and unemployment remain elevated. Therefore, Zimbabwe's macroeconomic framework, including national development policies and national budgets, must integrate social indicators in policy implementation to achieve sustainable socio-economic development outcomes.

Conclusion

The paper examined why socio-economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment and inequality, persist in Zimbabwe despite the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda and successive national development policies. Accordingly, the aim was to explore Zimbabwe's implementation architecture for the Sustainable Development Agenda, examine the alignment of national development policies with sustainable economic growth and social sustainability outcomes, and provide actionable recommendations for enhancing policy implementation to achieve sustainable socio-economic development. The paper developed a model for transitioning to sustainable socio-economic development and accompanied it with recommendations. Therefore, the novelty of this paper lies in addressing the implementation gap of sustainable socio-economic development in Zimbabwe. Documentary analysis of government policy documents and key informant interviews were used to gather insights. However, government policy documents are prone to bias as they can portray successes while downplaying failures. Findings established that implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda is characterised by fragmented governance, which affects desired policy outcomes. Moreover, Zimbabwe's national development policies fail to integrate social indicators and focus solely on economic stabilisation, thereby hindering sustainable socio-economic development. Consequently, the economy has experienced flux amid persistent socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment and inequality. Moreover, policy implementation is fraught with challenges, including exclusionary governance, fiscal indiscipline and corruption, limited fiscal space, reliance on primary commodities, and an informalised economy. Accordingly, the paper builds a model for transitioning to sustainable development by formulating recommendations, including

governance reforms, stakeholder buy-in to policymaking, formalising the economy, and targeting social indicators in policy implementation.

References

- Barron, P., Cord, L., Cuesta, J., Espinoza, S. A., Larson, G., & Woolcock, M. 2025. Social sustainability and the development process: what is it, why does it matter, and how can it be enhanced? *Oxford Development Studies*, 53(3), 222-237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2025.2502971>
- Baymul, C., & Sen, K. 2020. Was Kuznets Right? New Evidence on the Relationship between Structural Transformation and Inequality. *Journal of Development Studies*, 56(9), 1711-1731. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2019.1702161>
- Chilunjika, A., & Muzvidziwa-Chilunjika, S. R. T. 2020. Challenges Faced in the Implementation of the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation Economic Policy from 2013 to 2018. *International Journal of Humanities, Management and Social Sciences*, 3(2), 89-103. <https://doi.org/10.36079/lamintang.ij-humass-0302.150>
- Dugarova, E. 2015. *Social inclusion, poverty eradication and the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. UNRISD Working Paper, No. 2015-15, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/10419/148736>
- Kanyenze, G., Chitambara, P., & Tyson, J. 2017. *The outlook for the Zimbabwean economy. Supporting Economic Transformation*. Retrieved from https://set.odi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/SET-Outlook-for-Zimbabwe-Economy_Sep2017.pdf
- Glass, L. M., & Newig, J. (2019). Governance for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: How important are participation, policy coherence, reflexivity, adaptation and democratic institutions? *Earth System Governance*, 2(27), 100031. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2019.100031>
- Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ). 2008. *National Budget Statement*. Retrieved from https://sarpn.org/documents/d0002940/2008_National_Budget_Statement_Zimbabwe.pdf
- Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ). 2024. *National Budget Statement*. Retrieved from <https://zimtreasury.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Budget-Statement-2024.pdf>
- Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ). 2025. *National Budget Speech*. Retrieved from <https://zimtreasury.co.zw/budget-document-2025/>
- Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ). 2018. *Transitional Stabilisation Programme*. Retrieved from <https://zimbabwe.un.org/en/50093-zimbabwe-transitional-stabilisation-programme-2018-2020>
- Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ). 2020. *National Development Strategy 1*. Retrieved from https://www.mines.gov.zw/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/National-Development-Strategy-Presentation_NDS1-1.pdf
- Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ). 2025. *National Development Strategy 2*. Retrieved from <https://www.mines.gov.zw/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/National-Development-Strategy-2-NDS-2.pdf>
- Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ). 2025. *Public Debt Report: End of September 2025*. Retrieved from Zimbabwe Public Debt Management Office. <https://zimtreasury.co.zw/budget-documents-2026/>
- Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ). 2024. *Voluntary National Review III (VNR)*. Retrieved from <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2024/VNR%202024%20Zimbabwe%20Report.pdf>
- Kamran, M., Rafique, M. Z., Nadeem, A. M., & Anwar, S. 2022. Does Inclusive Growth Contribute Towards Sustainable Development? Evidence from Selected Developing Countries. *Social Indicators Research*, 165(2), 409-429. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-022-03020-6>
- Kotnik, Ž., Umek, L., Kovač, P., Stanimirović, D., & Vintar, M. 2020. Analysis of the key factors for successful public policy implementation: a qualitative study in Slovenia. *DANUBE: Law, Economics and Social Issues Review*, 11(2), 113-140. <https://doi.org/10.2478/danb-2020-0007>

- Kreinin, H., & Aigner, E. 2022. From “Decent work and economic growth” to “Sustainable work and economic degrowth”: a new framework for SDG 8. *Empirica*, 49(2), 281-311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10663-021-09526-5>
- Labour and Economic Development Institute of Zimbabwe (LEDRIZ). 2020. *Towards a Pro-Poor, Decent-Work Rich and Sustainable Macroeconomic Framework*. Retrieved from https://www.kubatana.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Towards-a-Pro-Poor-Decent-work-rich-and-Sustainable-Macroeconomic-Framework-August_2020.pdf
- Masunungure, E.V., & Zvoushe, H. 2023. An Analysis of the Existing Form of Governance Politics in Zimbabwe and Proposals for a New Kind of Policymaking. *AJIS*, 2(1), 14-30. <https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.YIFW6FNS>
- Mutenga, M. & Vyas-Doorgapersad, S. 2022. Assessing Economic Policies in Zimbabwe: The Growth with Equity Policy 1981. *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People*, 11(4). <https://doi.org/10.26458/jedep.v11i4.786>
- Newiak, M., Segura-Ubiergo, A., & Wane, A. A. (Eds.). 2022. *Good governance in Sub-Saharan Africa: opportunities and lessons*. International Monetary Fund. <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781513584058.071>
- Nwachi, L. 2021. Relationship between Participation and Social Inclusion. *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 9(10), 46-77. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2021.910004>
- Office of the Auditor General. 2020. *Appropriation Accounts, Finance and Revenue Statements and Fund Accounts*. Retrieved from https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/AG%20REPORT%202020%20FOR%20APPROPRIATION%20ACCOUNTS%20FINANCE%20ACCOUNTS%20REVENUE%20STATEMENTS%20AND%20FUND%20ACCOUNT%20.pdf
- Office of the Auditor General. 2024. *Appropriation Accounts, Finance and Revenue Statements and Fund Accounts*. Retrieved from https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Report%20of%20the%20Auditor-General%20for%20the%20Year%20Ended%202024%20on%20Appropriation%20Accounts%20Finance%20and%20Revenue%20Statements%20and%20Fund%20Accounts.pdf
- Olowu, A. 2025. Policy Implementation and Good Governance for Sustainable Development in Nigeria. *Journal of Sustainable Development Law and Policy*, 16(1), 52-67. <https://doi.org/10.4314/jsdlp.v16i1.3>
- Omri, A., & Ben Mabrouk, N. 2020. Good governance for sustainable development goals: Getting ahead of the pack or falling behind? *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 47(6), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eiar.2020.106388>
- Paraschiv, D.-M., Manea, D.-I., Țițan, E., & Mihai, M. 2021. Development of an Aggregated Social Inclusion Indicator. Disparities in the European Union in Inclusion/Exclusion Social Determined with Social Inclusion Index. *Technological and Economic Development of Economy*, 27(6), 1301-1324. <https://doi.org/10.3846/tede.2021.15103>
- Sachs, J. D. 2015. *The Age of Sustainable Development*. New York: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-age-of-sustainable-development/9780231173155/>
- Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Iablonovski, G. 2025. *Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century*. Sustainable Development Report 2025. Retrieved from <https://sdgtransformationcenter.org/reports/sustainable-development-report-2025>
- Sager, F., Mavrot, C., & Keiser, L. R. 2024. Introduction: the notion of policy implementation and why it is important. *In Handbook of public policy implementation* (pp. 1-10). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800885905.00006>
- Sun, Y., Amouzou Agbe, G.M.K., & Miningou, E. W. 2025. *Enhancing Governance in Niger: Progress, Challenges, and Policy Priorities*. IMF Selected Issues Paper, African Department, SIP/2025/042. International Monetary Fund: Washington DC. Retrieved from <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/Selected-Issues-Papers/2025/English/SIPEA2025042.ashx>
- Transparency International. 2026. *Corruption Perceptions Index 2025*. Retrieved from <https://files.transparencycdn.org/images/CPI-2025-Report-EN.pdf>
- UNDP. 1990. *Human Development Report 1990: Concept and Measurement of Human Development*. New York. Retrieved from <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-1990>
- UNCTAD. 2022. Stark contrasts in inclusive growth – progress towards equal opportunities needed everywhere. *SDG Pulse*. Retrieved from <https://sdgpulse.unctad.org/inclusive-growth/>

- Uwizeyimana, D. E. 2024. Why public policy Implementation fail in Africa. *Kurdish Studies*, 12(2), 627-644. <https://doi.org/10.67145/ks.v12i2.1839>
- Vyas-Doorgapersad, S. 2022. An assessment of economic policies in Zimbabwe in compliance with SMART principles. *Journal of Contemporary Management*, 19(1), 107-131. <https://doi.org/10.35683/jcm20137.140>
- WFP. 2026. *Zimbabwe Country Brief*. Retrieved from <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000172804/download/>
- Widianingsih, I., Abdillah, A., & Adikancana, Q. M. 2024. Inclusive development policy research: research identification, and future agenda. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2356054>
- World Bank. 1992. *Governance and Development*. Washington DC: The World Bank. Retrieved from <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/995041468323374213/pdf/105170REPLACEMENT0WDR01992.pdf>
- World Bank. 2000. *The Quality of Growth*. New York: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/756531468780293668>
- World Bank. 2024. *World Bank Group unveils strategy to drive inclusive growth and resilience in Zimbabwe*. World Bank. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news>
- Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT). 2025a. *Preliminary Report of the 2023 Economic Census*. Retrieved from https://www.zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/production/EconomicCensus/EC2025_PRESENTATION.pdf
- Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT). 2025b. *2025 Second Quarter Labour Force Survey*. Retrieved from https://www.zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/Macro/Labor-force/2025/Q2_2025_QLFS_Report.pdf
- Zvoushe, H. 2023. Public policymaking in Africa: experiences of Zimbabwe. *Handbook of Public Management in Africa* 108-130. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803929392.00020>
- Zhou, G., & Zvoushe, H. 2012. Public Policymaking in Zimbabwe: A Three-Decade Perspective. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2(8), 212-222. https://ijhss.thebrpi.org/journals/Vol_2_No_8_Special_Issue_April_2012/26.pdf

Funding. The research leading to the results is funded by the University of Johannesburg, School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, South Africa.

Data availability statement. The data used for analysing and presenting findings are available on request from the corresponding author. The data that is not publicly available is due to privacy restrictions.

Author Contributions. Conceptualisation: (*Prosper*); methodology: (*Prosper*); data analysis: (*Prosper, Dominique*); Writing-original draft preparation: (*Prosper*); writing, review and editing: (*Alouis*); visualisation: (*Dominique*).

Prosper MANAVELE is a PhD candidate in Public Management and Governance at the University of Johannesburg under the supervision of the second author. He holds the following Degrees: a Master's Degree in Public Administration and a BSc Hons Degree in Development Studies. Research interests: public policy analysis, political economy, public finance, and sustainable development.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6312-1989>

Dominique Emmanuel UWIZEYIMANA is a Full Professor and Director of the School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy (SPMGPP) at the University of Johannesburg. He is an NRF-Rated researcher specialising in public policy, programme and project implementation and evaluation. He holds a BA (cum laude) (UWC), BA Hons (cum laude) (US), Master of Social Science (UCT) and a *D Litt et Phil* (UJ) – all in the field of Public Management and Governance.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8062-5075>

Alouis CHILUNJIKA is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Johannesburg. He holds the following Degrees: a PhD in Public Management and Governance, a Master of Public Administration, and a BSc Hons in Administration. Research interests: public finance, public policy analysis, public administration, corporate governance, local governance, mineral resource governance, political science, and electoral processes.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9801-4803>

This is peer-reviewed scientific journal <https://jssidoi.org/ird/page/peer-review-policy>

Copyright © 2026 by author(s). Publishing rights by [UAB Sustainability for Regions](#)

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access