

Reframing NGO service delivery in a constrained civic space: ActionAid Zimbabwe's approach

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Abstract

This article challenges the perceived dichotomy between NGO service delivery and advocacy, arguing that in constrained civic spaces, strategic service provision is a potent tool for fostering democratic participation. Through a qualitative case study of ActionAid Zimbabwe (AAZ), the paper examines how the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) reframes service delivery not just as aid, but as a mechanism to enhance civic engagement. Findings from interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis demonstrate that AAZ's model service projects, designed to show what is possible and be replicated by the state, do more than meet immediate needs; they create platforms for community participation, build citizens' capacity to claim their rights, and enhance state accountability. While acknowledging the challenges of this approach, including internal tensions and the risk of undermining the state, and recognizing that the single-case design limits generalizability, this study provides a practical framework for practitioners. It demonstrates how NGOs can leverage service delivery as a form of democratic action, calling for a shift in perspective to view service provision as a critical site for political engagement and empowerment.

Keywords: *service delivery, campaigning NGOs, human rights-based approach, ActionAid Zimbabwe, sustainable livelihoods, democratic participation*

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1. Introduction

The role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in development is a subject to ongoing debates, particularly concerning the merits of direct service provision in contrast to advocacy and campaigning for systemic change (Brass, 2022; Bukenya, 2017; Cascant-Sempere, 2022; Herrold & AbouAssi, 2022; Odoom et al., 2022). While traditional development practice has been primarily focused on delivering essential services like healthcare, education, humanitarian assistance and strengthening food security (Odoom et al., 2022), critics of this approach have highlighted its potential to create dependency, undermine state responsibility, and fail to address the structural causes of poverty and inequality (Shivji, 2006; Teets, 2014). Consequently, learning from their own experiences and that of others, many NGOs have increasingly pivoted towards advocacy and campaigning, aiming to influence policy, challenge power structures, and promote broader social transformation (Archer, 2010, 2017; Cascant-Sempere, 2022; Hickey & Mitlin, 2004; Mitlin et al., 2007). However, this shift towards advocacy and campaigning overlooks the reality that in contexts with severely restricted civic space and/or weak state capacity, service delivery may be a crucial, and sometimes the only avenue for supporting vulnerable populations and possibly cultivate some form of civic engagement (Tshiyoyo, 2019).

This article argues that the prevailing dichotomy between service delivery and advocacy is a false one, obscuring the potential for strategically designed service interventions to act as catalysts for civic participation. It examines this potential through the work of ActionAid Zimbabwe (AAZ), which operates within a uniquely challenging political context. The Zimbabwean civic space is severely constrained by restrictive legislation, such as the 'Patriotic Act' amendments (to the criminal code) and the new Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Act of 2025, alongside operational bottlenecks that include excessive reporting requirements and state monitoring (CIVICUS, 2025; Sibanda, 2022). Within this environment, AAZ leverages its Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) to reframe service delivery not merely as a means to meet basic needs, but as a mechanism for building sustainable livelihoods, stimulating civic engagement, and enhancing state accountability. This approach, while successful, is not without its own internal tensions, reflecting the development sector's wider debate on the matter (Brass, 2022; Bukenya, 2017; Cascant-Sempere, 2022; Herrold & AbouAssi, 2022; Odoom et al., 2022).

Drawing on empirical evidence from a qualitative case study of AAZ which included in-depth interviews with staff and its network of campaigners called *Activistas*, focus group discussions with community members in six districts (Harare Central, Harare Rural, Epworth, Chitungwiza, Binga, and Nkayi), and a comprehensive analysis of AAZ's organisational documents, this article demonstrates that AAZ's service delivery interventions, grounded in its HRBA and reflective of the Zimbabwean context, actively promote civic participation. The article shows the inherent characteristics of AAZ which enable its democratic participation-enhancing service delivery work to be possible. It details how AAZ leverages service provision as a practical tool to build community capacity, create spaces for collective action, and empower citizens to claim their rights and hold duty-bearers accountable. This analysis directly challenges the assumption that service delivery is inherently apolitical, revealing its potential as a crucial site for political engagement and transformative socio-economic change.

This article proceeds as follows: first, it critically examines the existing literature on the service delivery versus campaigning debate, highlighting its limitations and arguing for a more nuanced and context specific perspective. Second, it introduces the integrated theoretical framework guiding the analysis, which draws from Herrold and AbouAssi's (2022) five contingent features of NGO service delivery work that fosters democratic participation, and ActionAid's Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). Third, it details the qualitative research methodology utilised, outlining the data collection and analysis procedures specific to the AAZ case study. Fourth, it presents the empirical findings, showing how AAZ's service delivery work aligns with the theoretical framework and contribute to the outcome of democratic participation. Fifth, it discusses the broader implications of these findings for both development theory and practice, offering recommendations for NGOs, donors, and governments. Finally, it concludes by advocating for a more democratic development practice that recognises the transformative potential of reframed NGO service delivery work.

2. The NGO Service Delivery vs. Advocacy/Campaigning Debate

The role of NGOs in development is a subject to an ongoing debate, often framed as a choice between direct basic services provision to the people in need and advocacy/campaigning for systemic change or transformation (Odoom et al., 2022). Proponents of NGO advocacy and campaigning work argue that these approaches offer a more

sustainable and transformative path to development, contending that addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality requires challenging unjust power structures and systems, influencing policy decisions, and holding governments and corporations accountable (Archer, 2017; Cascant-Sempere, 2022; Hickey & Mitlin, 2004).

From this perspective, service delivery work is seen as merely treating the symptoms of poverty, rather than tackling its underlying causes (Banks & Hulme, 2012). Critics further argue that service provision can create dependency among beneficiaries, undermining their agency and capacity for self-reliance (Lausund, 2017), and can inadvertently legitimise or even strengthen the role of the state, even when that state is undemocratic or unresponsive (Teets, 2014). Concerns have also been raised about the “NGOization” of social movements and localised struggles, where NGOs, with their professionalised structures and reliance on external funding, co-opt grassroots activism and dilute its radical potential (Al Jayousi & Nishide, 2024; Ungsuchaval, 2016). The emphasis on measurable outputs and short-term project cycles, often driven by donor demands and expectations, further detract from the long-term, systemic change or transformation that advocacy seeks to achieve (Pearce, 2010).

Despite these critiques, service delivery remains a core activity for many NGOs in the global south, including those that engage in advocacy or campaigning work (Cascant-Sempere, 2017). Several arguments support the continued relevance and importance of service provision in development work. First, it addresses immediate and pressing needs, providing essential resources and support to vulnerable populations, particularly in contexts where state capacity is weak or governments are unwilling or unable to fulfil their basic obligations to citizens (Al Mokdad, 2025; Deshmukh et al., 2024; Tarisayi, 2023). Second, service delivery builds trust and establish strong relationships with communities, creating a foundation for future collaboration and advocacy efforts (Herrold & AbouAssi, 2022). These “grassroots linkages” provides NGOs with valuable insights into local contexts and the lived realities of poverty and inequality, informing and strengthening their advocacy work (Banks et al., 2015, p. 710). Third, strategically designed service delivery can itself be a form of empowerment, building the skills, knowledge, and confidence of individuals and communities to participate in decision-making processes and claim their rights (Brass, 2022, p. 163). This is especially true when service provision is participatory, inclusive, and linked to broader efforts for social and political transformation.

However, the prevailing debate often rests on a false dichotomy, assuming that NGO service provision is inherently apolitical while advocacy and campaigning is inherently political. This overlooks the crucial observation of different researchers that all development interventions, including seemingly neutral service provision, are political, involving choices about resource allocation, reflecting and potentially reinforcing existing power relations, and embodying particular social values (Brass, 2022; Ferguson, 1994; Mosse, 2005). As Archer (2010) observes, service delivery is not a simple technical act but a site of political engagement with the potential to empower or disempower communities, strengthen or undermine state accountability, and foster or hinder democratic participation. Boulding (2010) in Bolivia, Brass (2022) in Kenya, and Herrold and AbouAssi (2022) in Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine have demonstrated how service delivery projects, in diverse contexts, lead to various forms of political debate, engagement and participation.

This is not to dismiss the valid concerns surrounding traditional service delivery. The potential for creating dependency, undermining state responsibility, and the “NGOization” of social movements are all serious risks that must be paid attention to (Incite, 2007; Lausund, 2017; Ungsuchaval, 2016). These critiques highlight the dangers of uncritical service provision, particularly when divorced from a broader commitment to social and political transformation. Which if not paid attention to, can lead to the depoliticization of development, reducing complex problems to technical issues solvable through external intervention, thereby obscuring underlying power dynamics whilst disempowering communities the NGOs aim to serve (Ferguson, 1994; Morina, 2023; Mosse, 2005).

Acknowledging these risks, however, does not negate the potential for strategically designed and implemented service delivery interventions which contribute to democratic outcomes. The existing literature, while strong in its critiques, lacks a nuanced understanding of how this potential can be realised, with several crucial gaps remaining. First, a move beyond broad generalisations about service delivery is needed, examining the specific modalities of service provision and recognising that different approaches have different impacts, not all service delivery is created equal. Second, the simplistic dichotomy between service delivery and advocacy/campaigning must be rejected in favour of an integrated approach that recognises their potential synergy. Finally, a robust analytical framework is needed to assess the political dimensions of service delivery, a framework that goes beyond measuring outputs

or perceived outcomes and examine the complex interplay between service provision, power relations, and democratic participation.

To address these gaps in the literature, this article turns to the framework developed by Herrold and AbouAssi (2022) as a valuable tool for analysis. Their work, which outlines five contingent features that shape the relationship between service delivery and the promotion of democratic participation, offers concrete criteria for analysing the conditions necessary to enable such interventions. Developed through research in the Middle East and North Africa, their framework provides a nuanced approach that moves beyond simplistic binaries, making it particularly useful for assessing how service delivery can instil democratic participation in constrained civic spaces. The following section introduces this framework in detail, explaining how it is integrated with ActionAid's HRBA to demonstrate the relevance of this hybrid theoretical framework in analysing the case of AAZ and its potential to illuminate the complex relationship between service delivery and democratic participation in Zimbabwe's constrained civic space.

3. An Integrated Framework for Understanding NGO Service Delivery Work

To analyse how AAZ utilises service delivery to promote both sustainable livelihoods and civic participation, this article employs an integrated theoretical framework. The framework is composed of two key elements, the contingent features of NGO service delivery that foster democratic participation, as developed by Herrold and AbouAssi (2022), and ActionAid's guiding HRBA (ActionAid International, 2020a). This synthesis provides a robust and nuanced lens for understanding AAZ's work within the Zimbabwean complex socio-political context.

The foundation of this integrated framework is the work of Herrold and AbouAssi (2022), who identify five contingent factors that influence the democratic outcomes of NGO service delivery in constrained civic spaces. These contingent features provide a practical framework for assessing the political dimensions of service provision, moving beyond simplistic notions of immediate outcomes. First, *organisational readiness* which refers to an NGO's internal capacity, encompassing resources, expertise, management systems, and, crucially, its rootedness in local communities. Second, *organisational governance* which examines the internal power structures and decision-making processes, with democratically structured NGOs better positioned to promote democratic values externally. Third, the *nature*

of the service provided highlighting the inherent differences between services, those requiring community collaboration and collective action being more likely to foster civic engagement. Fourth, *collaboration* which emphasises the importance of partnerships with diverse actors, creating platforms for dialogue and accountability. Finally, *donor risk appetite*, the willingness of funders to support potentially politically sensitive work, which significantly shapes an NGO's ability to address structural issues.

ActionAid's HRBA provides the values and strategic grounding for AAZ's interventions, complementing Herrold and AbouAssi's (2022) analytical lens. The HRBA asserts that development is fundamentally about fulfilling human rights, not merely meeting basic needs. This approach is built upon three core, interconnected principles, *empowerment* of rights-holders (communities) to claim their rights and hold duty-bearers (primarily the state) accountable, *solidarity* through building alliances and partnerships to amplify marginalised voices, and *campaigning* to challenge unjust power structures and advocate for policy reforms. The HRBA, therefore, provides the *normative framework* within which AAZ operates, defining its goals and guiding its actions.

These two frameworks are interwoven and mutually reinforcing. The HRBA provides the overarching values and goals (empowerment, rights, justice), while Herrold and AbouAssi's (2022) features offer an analytical tool to assess the existing conditions and how service delivery, guided by the HRBA, contributes to democratic participation. This integrated framework allows for a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of AAZ's work, moving beyond a simple evaluation of service delivery effectiveness to examine the specific features and conditions under which it serves as a catalyst for both the attainment of sustainable livelihoods and democratic participation.

4. Research Methodology

This article draws upon data and findings from a larger PhD thesis which examined the relationship between the work of three campaigning NGOs and the attainment of sustainable livelihoods in Zimbabwe. While the thesis employed the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) and the Political Process Theory (PPT) to analyse the three NGOs (the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development, the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association, and ActionAid Zimbabwe), this article focuses specifically on ActionAid Zimbabwe (AAZ), examining how its service delivery interventions, informed by the HRBA, contribute to both

sustainable livelihoods and democratic participation. This article extends the thesis' analysis by incorporating Herrold and AbouAssi's (2022) framework on the contingent features of service delivery that enhances democratic participation, allowing for a deeper examination of the political dimensions of AAZ's service provision work.

A qualitative case study approach was employed, for both the overarching PhD research and this article, aligning with Yin's (2009) argument that case studies are well-suited for in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within their real-world context. AAZ was selected as a relevant case due to its long-standing commitment to the HRBA (AAZ, 2014a, 2018b), its extensive experience in service delivery across various sectors in Zimbabwe (AAZ, 2017, 2021), and its explicit ambitions towards advocacy and empowerment grounded on people's democratic participation (AAZ, 2018b, 2024b). The Zimbabwean context, characterised by a constrained civic space and a history of political and economic challenges (Dendere & Taodzera, 2023), provides a critical setting for examining the intersection of NGO service delivery and democratic participation.

Data collection, conducted between August 2024 and March 2025 as part of the broader PhD project, involved three primary methods, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Twenty-seven semi-structured interviews were conducted across the three NGOs in the larger study, however, this article draws primarily on the nine interviews conducted with AAZ stakeholders (four staff members and five youth campaigners also known as *Activistas*) to gain insights into both organisational perspectives and the lived experiences of those involved in AAZ's work.

Interviewees were purposively selected based on their involvement in service delivery programs and their knowledge of the local context. Interview guides explored participants' understanding of the relationship between AAZ's work, sustainable livelihoods, and democratic participation. Twelve FGDs were conducted in six Zimbabwean districts (Harare Central, Harare Rural, Epworth, Chitungwiza, Binga, and Nkayi), chosen to represent a range of geographical contexts and livelihood systems. Each FGD included 8-15 participants, purposively selected to include a mix of community members, local leaders, and beneficiaries of NGO programs. Discussions explored community-level perspectives on the impact of NGO activities, and the role of service delivery in enhancing civic participation. Finally, a comprehensive review of relevant organisational documents was undertaken, focusing primarily on AAZ's strategic plans, annual reports, project proposals, and internal policy

documents. This provided valuable contextual information and corroborating evidence for the interviews and FGDs findings.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). This systematic process involved: familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and documents; coding, using both a priori codes derived from the theoretical frameworks (HRBA, Herrold and AbouAssi's features) and emergent codes arising from the data; theme development, refining and organising codes into broader themes; and interpretation, relating themes back to the research questions and theoretical frameworks to draw conclusions about the democratic potential of AAZ's service delivery work. NVivo qualitative data analysis software facilitated the coding and organisation of the data.

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the authors' institutional research ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection, with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw. To further mitigate bias, the researchers maintained reflexive journals to critically examine how their individual positionalities might influence the interpretation of data. The diverse backgrounds of the research team, ranging from development practice and public administration to sociology, facilitated a process of peer debriefing that served as an additional check on personal biases. These combined ethical and reflexive measures were crucial for ensuring a faithful representation of the participants' views.

To validate the findings, the research employed data triangulation and member checking. Findings were triangulated by cross-verifying data from interviews, FGDs, and organisational documents. Additionally, preliminary interpretations were shared with select participants for member checking to confirm accuracy and ensure the faithful representation of their views.

5. AAZ's Promotion of Democratic Participation Through Service Delivery

AAZ strategically leverages service provision, informed by its HRBA, to promote democratic and civic participation. While the integration of service provision and advocacy is a core element of AAZ's approach, it also presents internal tensions, reflecting the broader debate within the development sector about the balance between these two functions. This tension, observed by Cascant-Sempere (2022) at ActionAid Nigeria and Archer (2017) within the ActionAid Federation, is also present within AAZ. Despite these internal debates and

discussions, AAZ's practice on the ground demonstrates a commitment to using service delivery to build community capacity, strengthen civic engagement, and enhance state accountability. This section explores how AAZ's characteristics and conditions influences its service delivery work for it to empower communities and the mechanisms through which these efforts contribute to democratic participation.

5.1 AAZ's organisational readiness to deliver democratising service delivery work

AAZ demonstrates stable organisational readiness, a crucial element for leveraging service delivery to promote democratic participation. This readiness, as defined by Herrold and AbouAssi (2022, p. 5), encompasses more than just administrative capacity; it includes "deep embeddedness within local communities and a nuanced understanding of power dynamics". AAZ exemplifies this through its strategic focus on Local Rights Programs (LRPs), which are designed to be responsive to community-identified needs and priorities, ensuring that interventions are both relevant and sustainable (AAZ, 2018a, 2024c). This is achieved by consistently emphasising participatory program design and implementation in partnership with local organisations rather than imposing external solutions.

AAZ strategically works through local partner organisations, allowing them to capitalise on pre-existing community networks and trust, which maximises the impact and legitimacy of their interventions. A staff member illustrated this, stating, "*We implement through partners; this gives us the community rootedness that we need, because these partners are embedded within communities*". This approach is validated by community members themselves. In Binga, participants highlighted the partnership with the Basilwizi Trust, with one noting, "*...there is no doubt that we are connected with them, they are connected to us through Basilwizi, but everyone knows that ActionAid is here with us. We are part of its family*". Likewise, a participant in Nkayi described the partnership with the Health, Education and Food Security Organisation (HEFO) as supportive, stating, "*it is not like they come here to tell us what to do, they are partners with HEFO, and they support us on what we are doing*".

These partnerships are not merely logistical arrangements but strategic choices that build social capital and a sense of shared ownership. Crucially, this approach demonstrates AAZ's nuanced understanding of its own power and position, aligning with Herrold and AbouAssi's (2022, p. 6) assertion that effective NGOs must possess a "relational form of capacity". AAZ consciously avoids a top-down approach, instead acting as a facilitator and a

“trusted convener and honest broker between citizens and the state”. This capacity, enhanced by AAZ’s membership within the global ActionAid Federation, positions the organisation as a facilitator of community-led processes rather than a provider of pre-determined solutions.

5.2 Embedding democratic practice withing service delivery work

AAZ’s commitment to internal democratic governance, a feature Herrold and AbouAssi (2022) identify as crucial for NGOs promoting democratic participation, directly strengthens the effectiveness of its service delivery. This internal culture is operationalised through ActionAid’s Ten Principles of Feminist Leadership, with the principle of power-sharing being particularly central (ActionAid International, 2020b). The positive impact of such a democratic and power-sharing ethos is supported by recent studies on healthcare NGOs in Zambia which showed that transformational leadership, a style that, like feminist leadership, focuses on inspiring and empowering a team around a shared vision, had the strongest positive influence on outcomes and impact (Chirwa 2025). Rather than dictating solutions, AAZ prioritises facilitating community leadership, as one staff member explained: *“Our role is not to be the leaders, but to facilitate the leadership of others. We provide the tools and resources, but the community members are the ones who drive the change on the ground”*. This approach creates tangible empowerment, with one participant in Chitungwiza noting that AAZ *“allowed for discussions on power and how to use it,”* while another stated that AAZ *“make us not to feel powerless, they give us power to speak up with our interactions with them but that also make us get used to speaking up, ... we end up doing it everywhere”*. This observation aligns with quantitative findings from Kenya, where participatory approaches were also found to facilitate increased civic participation (Brass, 2022, p. 162).

This democratic ethos is further reflected in the principles of inclusion and transparency. AAZ actively ensures diverse voices from women and youth are represented in its decision-making, a commitment evidenced in its strategic plans (AAZ, 2014b, 2018a, 2024c). This practice empowers new actors to engage in civic life, as illustrated by a young woman in Binga: *“it has not been cultural for women especially us young women to come to these meetings. It is on the insistence of AAZ that we are asked to come, ... and our parents agree these days, because we have proved to be effective, we are attending more platforms such as the budget consultations and village meetings”*. Furthermore, AAZ’s transparent and consultative approach builds trust and models good governance. Community feedback

underscores this, with participants mentioning AAZ's "*openness about their programming,*" their "*consultative approach,*" and their "*involvement in participatory consultative processes,*" which, according to one community member, "*we often not see from the government*". By operating with this openness, AAZ strengthens its legitimacy while creating a community-level demand for similar accountability from state actors.

5.3 AAZ's strategic service provision

Despite its commitment to advocacy, AAZ continues to provide direct services, strategically using them as a catalyst for rights claims and an entry point for broader advocacy (AAZ, 2024a, 2024d). This approach, however, creates an internal debate, with some staff members feeling the organisation is losing its "niche areas" and "doing everything," which puts it in an "identity crisis". Despite these reservations, the majority of staff support the organisation's strategy of implementing "model hardware [service delivery] projects" designed to demonstrate what the state should be providing. These include school feeding programs, nutritional gardens linked to agroecology, and model accessible boreholes designed with understanding that they are often used by women. A staff member explained the goal: "*We are not trying to replace the government. We are showing what is possible, what should be happening. We are setting a standard and creating a demand for these services*".

This model approach, however, raises concerns about potentially undermining state responsibility. As one staff member noted, "*there is always a risk that when we step in to provide these things, the government will see it as letting them off the hook*". This internal debate echoes concerns about service delivery becoming an "end in itself" (Archer, 2017, p. 11). AAZ mitigates this risk by explicitly linking service provision to rights awareness. Focus group participants consistently emphasised this, with one noting: "*They (AAZ) do not just give us all these things. They also teach us about our rights and how to demand them from the government*". Another participant from Nkayi explained how after boreholes were fixed, "*they taught us that we have a right to clean water, it is not a favour from anyone, ... so we have to ask the government to do more*".

AAZ's service delivery is therefore strategically designed to empower communities to claim their rights by providing tangible examples of what they should expect from their government. This use of service delivery to educate and mobilise directly counters the "marketisation of social services" that Herrold and AbouAssi (2022, p. 7) warn against.

Instead, by demonstrating good governance in action, AAZ's service provision intentionally cultivates "norms and habits of democratic citizenship" (Herrold & AbouAssi, 2022, p. 7).

5.4 Using partnerships for enhanced democratic participation

AAZ recognises that achieving lasting, systemic change requires collaborative action across a wide range of stakeholders. This approach aligns with the assertion by Herrold and AbouAssi (2022, p. 8) that collaboration enhances an NGO's potential to promote democratic participation. This approach is crucial for several reasons. First, partnering with Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), like the Basilwizi Trust in Binga and HEFO in Nkayi, allows AAZ to leverage local expertise, ensuring interventions are contextually relevant and responsive. As one staff member explained, the goal is not for AAZ to be the "big NGO" but to support "the growth of a vibrant civil society at the local level". Second, collaboration with other CSOs and international NGOs allows AAZ to amplify its impact by contributing to broader campaigns, such as its #FundOurFuture global climate justice campaign (AAZ, 2024c, p. 2). This connects local work to larger issues, and as a staff member noted, "*in most cases, it is our local partners who push the conversation*".

AAZ's engagement with government agencies, while complex, is highly strategic. This reflects Herrold and AbouAssi's (2022, p. 8) nuanced view of state collaboration, which recognises both benefits and risks. While maintaining its independence, AAZ collaborates with various government ministries on initiatives like the work towards a new disaster risk management legislation, women's rights issues and agricultural programs (AAZ, 2021, 2023). The strategic benefit, as one staff member noted, is that "*if we work on a project together [with the government], that also means they will give us an ear when we highlight some of their shortcomings*". This collaboration also directly benefits communities by making officials more accessible. A participant in Harare explained that "*when the NGOs bring them to our communities during workshops and other things, we get to access them more*". This finding aligns with research in Kenya showing that NGOs facilitate increased political participation by directly linking citizens to government officials (Brass, 2022, p. 163).

However, these collaborative engagements with the government create challenges. The confrontational advocacy of AAZ's youth campaigners can contrast with the organisation's formal government partnerships, creating tensions. One campaigner recalled a time they were pushing the government on corruption while AAZ was partnering the government on a related

project, admitting “*it was tough to balance the lines*”. This mirrors similar challenges noted in ActionAid Nigeria as observed by Cascant-Sempere (2022). Community members also observe this dynamic, with one in Nkayi commenting that, “*AAZ works with them (the government), but they also hold them accountable. They do not just agree with everything they say*”. These scenarios illustrate the delicate balance AAZ maintains, collaborating for strategic access while retaining the critical independence needed to advocate for community rights.

5.5 Navigating donor expectations and empowering communities

Donor risk appetite, the fifth contingent feature identified by Herrold and AbouAssi (2022, p. 9), presents a complex and contradictory scenario for AAZ. While the organisation’s engagement in long-term, transformative work, including working with social movements, suggests some donor tolerance for risk, the broader funding environment for international NGOs presents pressures that undermine a truly rights-based and empowering approach. Tallack (2020) noted that many international NGOs face a challenging funding landscape characterised by declining income and increasing pressure to demonstrate short-term, measurable results. This “*existential funding challenge*,” as Tallack (2020, p. 1) characterised it, pushes organisations towards safer, less politically contentious projects, diluting their commitment to addressing the root causes of communities’ challenges.

Within ActionAid, David Archer (2017, p. 8) highlights the “*tensions between the use of HRBA and donor discourse and requirements*,” noting that the dominant donor paradigm often prioritises “*simplistic narratives, short-term quick wins, payment by results, (and) value for money*”. This emphasis on quantifiable outputs is fundamentally at odds with the “*complexity of long-term change processes and a focus on shifting power*” that characterises a genuine HRBA (Archer, 2017, p. 8). The challenge, as David Archer points out, is navigating these donor demands without compromising core principles. This tension is reflected in AAZ staff experiences. While not explicitly criticising donors, some staff members expressed concerns about the pressure to demonstrate short-term impact, with one noting: “*Sometimes it feels like we have to show results quickly ... service delivery allows for those quick reportable results*”. The staff member added that: “*However, real empowerment takes time to be reportable. So yes, service delivery work is a good entry point to gain funding and report, but real results can only be seen later. It is a constant balancing act*”.

6. Discussion and Implications of the Findings

This study's findings, centred on the case of AAZ, have significant implications for understanding the role of NGOs in development, particularly the complex relationship between service delivery and democratic participation. The analysis challenges the persistent dichotomy between these two approaches, demonstrating that strategically designed service delivery can be a powerful catalyst for stimulating civic engagement, building community capacity, and enhancing state accountability, even within a constrained civic environment like Zimbabwe. The case of AAZ provides compelling evidence that the debate surrounding service delivery versus advocacy is often overly simplistic, showing instead that they can be synergistic components of a holistic approach to development. By grounding its work in a HRBA, AAZ reframes service delivery as a site of political engagement where communities learn to articulate their needs and claim their rights, supporting literature that recognises the inherent political dimensions of all development interventions (Afioma et al., 2024; Ferguson, 1994).

The success of AAZ's approach, however, is not solely attributable to the act of service delivery itself, but rather to the specific way in which it is implemented. The organisation's strong readiness and governance, its commitment to participatory approaches with local partners, the nature of the services it provides, and its navigation of a complex funding environment all contribute to its positive impact. This highlights that even in challenging environments like Zimbabwe, NGOs can leverage service delivery to stimulate democratic participation, provided they do so strategically and with a clear commitment to human rights principles.

However, a more critical examination of the findings requires considering alternative explanations and potential confounding factors. For instance, it is plausible that the observed increase in civic participation is not exclusively due to AAZ's HRBA model but could be partially attributed to the general effects of any significant NGO intervention that introduces new resources and organisational focus into a community. Furthermore, the crucial role of established local partners like the Basilwizi Trust raises the question of causality: success may stem as much from the pre-existing legitimacy and capacity of these local actors as from AAZ's specific approach. Several confounding factors must also be acknowledged. The model's effectiveness may be highly context-dependent, contingent on the specific social dynamics of the districts studied and may not be as successful in different settings. Additionally, the

pressure to secure funding might influence the selection of projects or communities that are predisposed to success, potentially skewing the results. Acknowledging these complexities does not invalidate the study's findings but rather situates them within a more realistic and nuanced understanding of development work and its complexities.

Despite these complexities, the findings offer key implications for theory and practice. For NGOs, the AAZ case study provides a practical model for integrating service delivery and advocacy, suggesting they should operate within a clear rights-based framework, prioritise participatory approaches, build strong local partnerships, and design services that empower individuals to claim their rights. Additionally, NGOs should advocate for a funding environment that supports long-term, transformative work rather than short-term, measurable outputs. By adopting these practices, NGOs can contribute to both meeting immediate needs and achieving lasting social change.

This study's single-case design provides valuable insights but inherently limits the generalisability of the findings. Future research should include comparative studies across different contexts to determine the transferability of AAZ's model. While this research provides a rich snapshot, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term sustainability of the observed effects on civic participation and state accountability. Further research could also comparatively analyse how different types of service interventions promote democratic participation and should incorporate perspectives from government officials to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. Addressing these limitations will strengthen the evidence base for reframing NGO service delivery as a crucial component of democratic development.

7. Conclusion

This study concludes that the conventional dichotomy between NGO service delivery and advocacy is a false one that hinders transformative development. The case of ActionAid Zimbabwe (AAZ) demonstrates that the critical question is not if NGOs should deliver services, but how they can strategically leverage that delivery to empower citizens and strengthen civil society, even in constrained civic spaces. AAZ's success lies in its deliberate integration of a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) into its work, using community needs as entry points for rights awareness and collective action. By consciously acting as a facilitator with deep community roots and a commitment to internal democratic principles, AAZ reframes

service delivery as a potent form of political engagement and a catalyst for democratic action. While acknowledging the complexities and internal tensions this model creates, this study offers a compelling framework for understanding service provision as a critical site for democratic and civic engagement.

For practitioners, these findings offer several actionable recommendations. NGOs should ground all service interventions in a rights-based framework that explicitly links the provision of a service to a specific, claimable right. This involves designing projects as “demonstration models” intended to set standards for state provision rather than as permanent substitutes for state responsibility and using these models as advocacy tools to fuel citizen demands for government action. Success in this approach also hinges on prioritising deep, long-term partnerships with local organisations based on co-design and shared power. Finally, practitioners must invest in their own internal democratic cultures, such as adopting feminist leadership principles, as an organisation’s internal values directly shape its external effectiveness.

However, for this approach to be effective, both governments and donors must adapt. Governments in contexts like Zimbabwe should create a more enabling legal and operational environment for civil society rather than imposing restrictive controls. They should also engage with NGO-led demonstration projects as opportunities for learning and collaboration and institutionalise more direct and participatory channels for citizen engagement. Donors, in turn, must shift from funding short-term projects to providing flexible, long-term support for rights-based work that allows for adaptation and learning. This requires moving beyond simplistic output metrics to valuing the process of empowerment and increasing their “risk appetite” to support politically engaged, transformative development, rather than pushing NGOs towards safer, less contentious projects.

For researchers, this study highlights several critical avenues for future inquiry. Future work should move beyond single-case studies to conduct comparative analyses of rights-based versus traditional service delivery models across different political contexts. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to track the long-term sustainability of civic participation catalysed by these interventions, particularly after an NGO’s direct involvement ends. To create a more comprehensive understanding, researchers must also actively incorporate the perspectives of state actors to analyse their reactions to this form of “politicized” service

delivery and identify the conditions under which they are most likely to adopt and scale up successful models.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

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