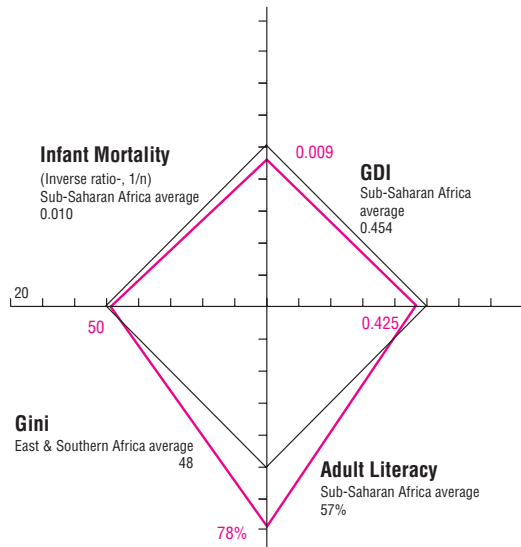


•MICHELO HANSUNGULE



The Equity Diamond: National values in terracotta compared to regional ones in blue. Source: Infant mortality: UNICEF, The State of the World's Children, 1998; Adult literacy: UNICEF, The State of the World's Children, 1998; GDI (Gender Development Index): UNDP, Human Development Report 1998; GINI: World Bank, World Development indicators 1998. (The regional average for this indicator was calculated by Social Watch).

Many people in Zambia face desperate economic and social situations. Households are technically insolvent. Economic reforms implemented by the current government since 1991 have caused massive unemployment, ruining families who depended on the lost jobs for their living. In the last eight years, when economic reforms were said to be doing well, poverty levels among Zambians escalated and deepened. Over 80% of the Zambian population (about 8 million) are «officially» poor. To most people, life is no longer worth living. Children are faced with excruciatingly high levels of poverty preventing them from attending schools or doing other things children normally do. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has made things worse, leaving many children orphaned. Most people do not enjoy basic rights and freedoms.

LIFE EXPECTANCY: 40 YEARS

A DIVIDED SOCIETY

Zambia faces serious social divisions. While the majority is poor, a tiny fraction of the population accesses all the country's resources. By their own admission, the top political leadership has been enriched by the same conditions that made many families poor. The latest declaration of assets and liabilities filed by senior government leaders with the office of the Chief Justice shows that their wealth has increased tremendously since they assumed power. How this happened is perplexing in view of the fact that their salaries as public servants are low. Despite a series of raises granted them by parliament, their salaries simply cannot compare with their assets. ***It is hence quite tempting to conclude that public officials have been converting public wealth into private wealth, or that they have used public power, entrusted to them as leaders, to improve their personal situations. Is this how the market works?***

While it is true that poverty and social exclusion are universal problems, some countries have a greater share than others. Political leaders in some countries are truly committed to ensuring access by all to basic social services. In nearby South Africa, *eg*, nearly every household has been provided with tap water. This happened in only four years of President Nelson Mandela's democratic government. In Uganda, it was just reported that universal primary school education has become a reality. Uganda under President Museveni faces even more challenges than Zambia. Museveni is fighting expensive foreign and internal wars. Uganda is restructuring her economy more or less under the same conditions as Zambia. Yet Museveni is now reported to have sent all primary school age children to school. Why is this not possible in Zambia? Why is it that Zambian ministers cannot do what a professor of law turned minister has done in South Africa? ***What do the people entrusted with the government in Zambia do in their offices? If Zambia is not a classical case of bad governance, then what is?***

Some economists have argued that what the country needs is trained, skilled workers. It is true that skilled labour is a necessary precondition for social and economic development. But for development to meet basic needs, Zambia already has enough skilled labour. The problem is how to effectively and efficiently utilise it. For example, Soweto Market in Lusaka, Zambia's biggest market, is normally flooded when it rains because it does not have the necessary drainage. It is an eyesore which breeds many

diseases. The irony is that, within the market, there are over 1,000 trained and highly skilled plumbers running makeshift businesses. They only need to be mobilised and some equipment purchased to fix the plumbing in Soweto market. There is no need to train more plumbers.

THE DETERIORATING ECONOMY

Since it came to power, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) government has sought to lay the foundations of capitalism through the introduction of a market economy. These efforts are so appreciated in the West that a Western magazine «voted» Zambia's finance minister the «best» Minister of Finance in the world and described the country's economy as a «success story». This is how the West encourages fledgling capitalists to hold firm. Despite Zambia's «success story», its economy has worsened under the MMD government. For the last seven years, economic growth has averaged a meagre 1%. Similarly, the rate of inflation, which had been brought down to 18.6% from 192% in 1990, is now rising, as are interest rates. Zambia's economic problems are manifested in high rates of infant, under-five and maternal mortalities. The HIV/AIDS virus has resulted in many deaths, especially among the economically active groups. People are also dying from cholera, malaria and other preventable diseases.

Zambia has one of the highest early death rates in the world, beaten only by Sierra Leone, Uganda, Malawi and Afghanistan, in that order. **Life expectancy has dropped to 39 years for men and 40 years for women.** These woes are taking place at a time when the «success» of the structural adjustment programme is described as second to none.

One direct effect of economic reform is the high labour turnover. More Zambians have lost their jobs than at any other time in the history of the country. Others have seen the value of their incomes dwindle to below subsistence level. As part of the adjustment policies, government has introduced fees at schools and hospitals. No one from government has been able to answer the question: How are people going to pay?

Meanwhile, the government of President Chiluba has made sure not to disappoint its Western allies by failing to re-pay the country's huge foreign debt on time. Zambia is current on repayments of its foreign debt even though the debt is unsustainable. **We pose one fundamental question to Western countries and the international financial institutions: Should the debt and the interest on debt incurred on primary school education be paid back?**

TRIBALISM AND ETHNICITY

A worrying trend is the emergence of ethnic and tribal tendencies in the country's politics. Political authorities are failing to support the diversity that characterises the Zambian society. Beginning with the president himself, senior politicians have publicly favoured the Bemba ethnic group over others in the

country. Many communities that are not well-connected at the top have suffered discrimination in the allocation of resources.

Political parties headed by individuals from other tribes are labelled «tribal parties». Political parties led by Bembas are not so labelled. Although the MMD government has people from various ethnic groups, real power rests with only a few people, mainly from the Bemba ethnic group. The non-Bembas in cabinet or other positions are tokens, retained to portray a picture different from what actually obtains.

GENDER AND DISCRIMINATION

Gender based discrimination is still rife in Zambia. Although women in general suffer from various forms of discrimination, rural women and poor uneducated women in urban areas suffer most. It is still difficult for women to act as individuals in obtaining access to credit, land, or employment opportunities. Government action in redressing these imbalances has been extremely disappointing. There is daily rhetoric that policies and laws will be reviewed to ensure gender balance and equity, but in practice, there are no tangible results. Some NGOs have tried to redress the situation by holding awareness campaigns and extending practical assistance such as credit to needy women. NGO resources are limited, however, and NGOs cannot take certain decisions that government can. This means that the intervention of NGOs, important though it may be, is limited.

UNFULFILLED COMMITMENTS

In Copenhagen, 185 nations committed themselves to reduce poverty and eliminate extreme poverty, and to ensure social integration and development. There is a big difference between speeches and practice. Some states will be quick to translate decisions into domestic policy while others will take their time. In countries where democracy is limited, implementation of internationally agreed decisions takes a long time. Zambia is a typical example of a country with limited democracy.

Since 1995, the country has behaved as though it was forced to accept the results of the Social Summit. Zambia's endorsement of the Copenhagen commitments was half-hearted. Apart from drawing a Strategic Framework and an Action Plan, there is no tangible evidence of the implementation of specific measures toward fulfilment of the commitments. Even developing rules to deal with poverty reduction and social exclusion has been a very difficult exercise for Zambian authorities. The National Poverty Reduction Action Plan, which includes a promise to reduce by 50% of the 1995 level, is still in draft stage. Authorities have for all this time been «consulting» on the details of the Plan, which is full of rhetoric and short on substance. For example, the Plan includes making land available to the poor and to women, but it does not say how. There has been no access to credit for poor people as directed by the Copenhagen Commitments and specified in the

national Plan. Government has not really co-operated with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) toward implementation of the Social Action Programme. In short, Zambia has not fulfilled any of the commitments she made at the Summit. Rather, she has retrogressed on a number of issues.

Resources that should have been spent on poverty reduction have been misused through corruption and mismanagement. There are constant reports of corruption in government. President Chiluba himself acknowledged that there is something fishy when roads start to deteriorate only two months after resurfacing. In the midst of all this, a Presidential Fund, with billions of Kwacha, was set up to enable the president to help himself to public resources. But President Chiluba does not hold the constitution in high regard. He has been dishing out money from his Fund to selected schools, churches, politicians, *etc.*. The public has been hoodwinked into believing that the Presidential Fund is an important part of public service through government-organised TV programmes showing how grateful recipient schools are to the president for having «given» them money. The public is made to believe that the president is a kind-hearted man who donates personal resources to government schools.

Many of Zambia's commitments to international instruments and declarations have gone unheeded by Zambian authorities. The commitments of the Copenhagen Social Summit are no different. The government must be closely watched to see how she deals

with her commitments. In the new year, Zambians must demand nothing less than the fulfilment of all of them.

So far, donor countries have failed to implement the 20/20 Initiative and so have countries like Zambia. Since there are not enough resources flowing from the international community for social programmes, poor countries themselves must lead the way in addressing poverty and social exclusion. The government must channel public resources into poverty alleviation programmes.

Faith in the magic of the free market is not the answer to Zambia's problems. The last eight years have demonstrated beyond doubt that the current model needs revisiting. President Chiluba believes so firmly in the free market that he even set up a desk at State House to protect the interests of vendors. Unfortunately, many of these so-called vendors are thieves who steal from government. At the time of this research, it was disappointing to see among items proudly displayed for sale by «vendors» of automotive spare parts at Soweto Market, a door from a dismantled landcruiser still bearing the mark of the «Ministry of Mines and Mineral Development». Is this what is going to get Zambians out of their poverty?

- **Women for Change**
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