

ZAMBIA

Sixty years in abject poverty

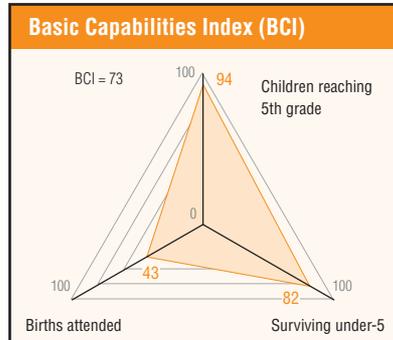


Sixty years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this country has become a classical example of how the rights it enumerated can remain a pipe-dream to most people. The “benefits” of opening its markets have gone to Western countries exclusively. Both the Zambian State and the international community have been guilty of “crimes against humanity”, including the world’s lowest life expectancy for people under 40, high rates of morbidity and maternal mortality, increasing levels of illiteracy, gender-based violence and extreme levels of poverty.

Women for Change
Michelo Hansungule

Most African countries conceive, develop and implement their national policies and programmes on areas like governance, human rights and rule of law with the policies and expectations of G-8 countries in mind. Thus it was not a surprise that Oxfam’s review of the Gleneagles G-8 Summit held in Scotland in 2005, reported that “on 31 March 2006, the Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa announced that from that day on basic health care would be free to everyone.”¹ However, President Mwanawasa’s statement was utterly insensitive and blatantly false. To this day Zambia has absolutely no free medical care. True, senior government leaders and favoured colleagues do get free care, but not in Zambia. Save for the founding President Kenneth Kaunda who goes to the local University Teaching Hospital in Lusaka whenever he is in need of medical attention, senior government leaders, some members of opposition, as well as their families, frequent the best medical facilities outside Zambia especially in South Africa at state expense. None of the foreign medical services at the disposal of these leaders and their families are available to the poor, the majority of whom are women. Though the Constitution forbids discrimination, Government, through its policy on access to medical care, in fact encourages if not perpetrates blatant discrimination against the poor and the weak sections of society. Discriminatory access to foreign medical care is just one example of policies that easily collide with constitutional precepts whose aim is to protect the basic dignity of all Zambians.

Therefore, contrary to the claims attributed to late President Mwanawasa, in fact not only access to health care but guaranteeing life itself for the majority of the population in Zambia is an impossible proposition. Due to the deep levels of poverty, life in Zambia especially among women, children and other vulnerable sections of the population is far from rosy. The social face of Zambia looks like a war zone. In spite of the so-called zero digit inflation rate, which authorities claim to be the result of their successful policies in attracting foreign investment, the social picture is still deeply disheartening. Though the country is not

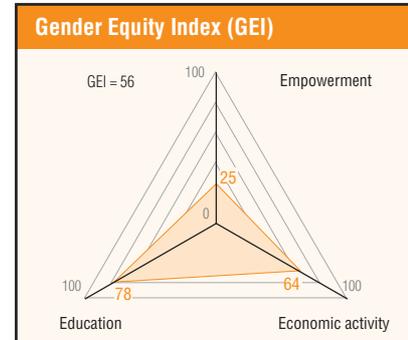


at war, it has one of the highest rates of maternal and other forms of mortalities anywhere in the world. Along with Zimbabwe, a country in economic and political turmoil, it shares the dubious distinction of having the lowest life expectancy rate in the world for citizens aged 40 and below. An estimated 80% or more Zambians live below the poverty line.

This has been compounded by acutely high incidence of HIV/AIDS especially among the productive and economically active population groups. Zambia has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the region. Government policies on HIV/AIDS especially on mother to child transmission have not yet started to turn the tide against the scourge. This speaks volumes of government inability to develop policies and initiate aggressive action plans that would confront the deadly virus. Besides HIV/AIDS, malaria continues to ravage havoc among Zambia’s poor. In fact, the largest number of mortalities are still the result of this ancient disease long declared over in other parts of the world. All this is against guarantees on the right to life, not only enshrined in the country’s Constitution but also in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Nevertheless, instead of channelling its attention towards saving the lives of the majority of people, the Government recently announced hefty pay rises for the already highly paid head of state and senior government officials sending the clearest message that it remained insensitive to the plight of the poor and vulnerable in society.

Declarations and pipe-dreams

Zambia’s leaders have adopted several declarations, resolutions and decisions both at the regional and global levels with the intention to arrest the spiral of poverty. These, however, have largely remained pipe-dreams. Local institutions meant to implement



these dreams – like the University Teaching Hospital (UTH), previously one of the country’s flagship medical facilities – are in a state of virtual collapse. Doctors, nurses and health workers from UTH and other State and mission institutions throughout the country have marched in the streets on countless occasions to protest poor conditions and grossly inadequate facilities at their institutions. Education, especially in rural areas, has remained unprovided. Each year, scores of young people are thrown out of the school system due to lack of places. Misgovernance together with scarce resources translate themselves into failed health and school systems. True, Zambia has been admitted for participation in the much acclaimed Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) managed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which should have relieved pressure for basic resources, but the country has not yet started to enjoy the benefits of this and of other ‘rich man’s’ solutions from Washington.

Ironically, it is at the same time that the late President was declaring free health care that his government was fighting advocates of the poor who were campaigning for a broad-based and inclusive constitution that in the text would guarantee basic human rights, especially economic, social and cultural rights – including the right to health care. The Government has been opposed towards enshrining socio-economic rights in the basic document and making those rights justiciable. The clearest way in which the Government demonstrated its opposition to these rights is by denying participation of free civic bodies in the constitution-making process. Although the Government is running a constitutional review process, a broad range of civil society groups and organizations are excluded, including independent organizations such as Women for Change, opposition

1 Oxfam (2006). “The view from the summit – Gleneagles G-8 one year on”. Oxfam Briefing Note, 9 June. Available at: <www.oxfam.org/en/policy/briefingnotes/bn060609_g8_oneyr>.

groups and faith-based and student organizations. This, of course, spells doom for the poor who have no representation in constitution-making.

Economic instruments: raping the poor

Rather than promoting the rights of poor people, the main thrust of the country's budget is to promote foreign investment. Government's main preoccupation in budgeting is to promote mining development by foreign nationals in order to increase the country's foreign exchange position. Similarly, international efforts through such agreements as the World Trade Organization (WTO)² aim principally to encapsulate benefits for foreigners. As a result, 'negotiated' aid conditions with the IMF and the World Bank³ worsen the already pathetic situation. A programme designed for citizen economic empowerment has been introduced and is part of this year's budget but it is not adequately funded. Year in and year out, the budgeting process⁴ has failed to honour the minimum human rights commitments that Zambia has voluntarily assumed through its own Constitution and by signing international covenants and conventions. Achievement of human rights standards are not the basis for budgeting. Similarly, most economic policies and agreements are formulated with the aim to open up markets to Western products and goods for the exclusive benefit of Western countries, institutions and interests, rather than address the situation of the poor.

Zambia is an excellent example of a typically poor country which is presented by those with interests in it as a "success story".⁵ Just like obedient primary school pupils, the country's leadership "listens" attentively and uncritically accepts whatever is taught by liberal schools in Washington and other Western capitals. After Frederick Chiluba, the country's second president, took office in 1991, Zambia privatized virtually anything in sight, as dictated to it by the IMF and the World Bank. No one bothered to think through the implications of this to the social sector. Unemployment soared while education became impossible. Globalization,⁶ the latest catchphrase in liberal societies, is a carefully crafted smokescreen for Western economic models and therefore Western values, ideologies and conditions. Concealed by enticing rhetoric, its purpose is to facilitate the wholesale rape of the poor and total alienation and dispossession of their natural wealth. The negative impact of globalization on social, economic, cultural and environmental rights, and therefore on dignity, has been devastating. African societies, economies and cultures have been battered left, right and centre, due to this globalization mania and forced to replace traditional values such as cooperation with selfish individualism and made to believe that this was being civilized. For every US

dollar grudgingly advanced to 'aid' poor people, in fact their children, women and other vulnerable Zambians will sacrifice their bare lives and forever struggle to repay wealthy Western societies and families, at skyrocketing interest rates.

Hardest for women

Women, already a vulnerable group, have been hardest hit by the skewed global economic politics and policies than their menfolk. Though they are *de facto* heads of households, policies do not favour them. Zambian women in particular make up the overwhelming majority of the unemployed, the illiterate, uneducated and voiceless non-participating segments of society. Women suffer most from ill-planned privatization schemes that pushed the few among them in employment out of the grudging labour market. This worsened the already pathetic situation of women, already destituted of independent resources. The majority of women are engaged in agriculture where they work the land of their husbands, fathers, brothers, etc., gratuitously or for employers who pay them pittance. Meanwhile, the agricultural sector, formerly the mainstay of livelihood, especially in rural areas, has collapsed since the Government bowed to the will of the mighty Western policies, and suddenly stopped subsidizing it. In the years that followed, poverty rates soared. This year, again at the behest of Western institutions, the Government has just declared that it will remove subsidies for fertilizer and maize seeds. This is a death sentence to the majority of poor people at the behest of its own government. Without this basic lifeline, agriculture which saved lives will be out of reach to the millions.

As a result of the international financial and trade architecture and the trends towards liberalization and deregulation, many non-agricultural jobs have also disappeared. To cite one example, scores of women employed in the quasi-state Agri-Flora industry in Lusaka became destitute when it suddenly closed down.⁷ The State had discontinued its support to a very sensitive industry without providing alternatives. This was particularly devastating in the many households where the spouse simultaneously lost his income as well due to the high rate of dismissals, retrenchments and forced early retirements – a common occurrence. When Zambia Airways, one of the country's largest state employers, went bankrupt, hundreds of thousands of employees lost their jobs, without any social support system to fall back on.

Unprotected rights

More than 80% of Zambians are simply too poor to value their human rights and fundamental freedoms. Most would readily agree with Jeremy Bentham, who centuries ago claimed that natural rights are "simple nonsense" and the idea that natural rights are impermissible "rhetorical nonsense – upon stilts".⁸

Similarly, they are bound to concur with the equally cynical view by Alasdair MacIntyre, that 'there are no such rights and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns.'⁹

The Constitution has a splendid bill of rights that guarantees all of the standard civil and political rights, including the rights to life, equality, prohibition of torture, and non-discrimination, as well as a series of political freedoms, including freedom to associate, peacefully assemble, demonstrate and express opinions without hindrance. It also lays out rights to property, equal protection of law, fair trial, etc. However these rights have no practical meaning to the millions whose lives are dogged by squalor and despair.

We have already said that the Constitution does not offer guarantees to economic, social and cultural rights that would decidedly be the most relevant to the country's poor. Although such rights form an integral part of African Union and United Nations treaties and covenants that the State has ratified, these international agreements have no standing in the country's judicial bodies and therefore cannot be presented to judicial officers as means of protection. Despite these omissions, the State has established a plethora of institutions and organizations allegedly dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights, some of the most important being:

- Ministry of Gender and Development (MoGD)¹⁰
- Human Rights Commission (HRC)
- Anti-Corruption Commission; and (ACC)
- Gender in Development Division (GiDD)
- Office of the Investigator-General (OIG).

Unfortunately, most of them are timorous and exist merely by name. The ACC and OIG try to discharge what little mandate they have but with difficulty. State support is lacking to enable them operate efficiently. As a result, violations of human rights are still the norm. Women in particular have to contend with traditional and modern social, cultural and economic norms and institutions that discriminate against them. None of the above institutions have proven to be relevant to ordinary people in situations of human rights violations, especially women.

Conclusion

In Zambia, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a long way from bearing fruit. Similarly, constitutional guarantees are yet to ensure the much-needed protection to the poor. Sixty years of the Universal Declaration and in Zambia's case, forty-four years of the Declaration under 'freedom' has only produced more poor people. ■

2 World Trade Organization. "Zambia and the WTO". Available at: <www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/countries_e/zambia_e.htm>.

3 Manbiot, G. "To keep them destitute and starving. The World Bank practices allow the rich to steal from the poor", *The Guardian*, 12 April 2000.

4 Africa Fiscal Transparency. Zambia, <www.internationalbudget.org/resources/ZAMBIA.pdf>.

5 See Zambia Privatisation Agency: <www.zpa.org.zm>.

6 Globalisation Guide, <www.globalisationguide.org>.

7 "African Agriculture and the World Bank: Development or Impoverishment?", *Pambazuka News* No. 353. 13 March 2008. Available at: <www.pambazuka.org/en/issue/353>.

8 Quoted in Jones, P. (1994) *Rights. Issues in Political Theory*, London: Macmillan, p. 90.

9 *Ibid.*

10 In practice, this author was told by several civil societies that there was no Ministry of Gender and Development as such. What was there instead was the Minister of Gender but without a ministry. Civil societies explained they were not asking for a ministry but for stronger commitment on the part of Government to promote gender and rights. What most of them were calling for was for Government to establish a body like a gender commission to seriously begin to promote and protect women's rights.