

WHAT TO DO ABOUT POVERTY IN ZAMBIA?

by Dr. Peter Henriot

Poverty in Africa is big in the news these days. But will it be big in the policy decisions here in Zambia?

The recent regional meeting in Windhoek, Namibia, highlighted the extremely serious depth and dimensions of poverty among the people of Southern Africa. The very thorough report on the meeting offered by Samuel Ngoma in the *TIMES OF ZAMBIA* (17 May 1997) emphasised the challenge made at the meeting for governments to "translate fine words into deeds." As Ngoma explained, the causes of poverty in the region are well-known, including crises in governance, debt burden, and refugee burden.

Responses to poverty must come from government policies, civil society actions, private sector involvement, and citizens' participation. The Windhoek meeting stressed that the media has a key role to play to help "shape and define that human development agenda dealing with anti-poverty policies and priorities."

However, it is striking that in Mr. Ngoma's analysis no mention was made of the specific application of the findings of the Windhoek meeting to the situation in Zambia. Perhaps this is to come in a subsequent article. But let me introduce at least a few key points that we should be paying attention to if we are to meet the challenge of poverty in Zambia by translating fine words into deeds.

ERADICATION AND ALLEVIATION

The first point to emphasise is that there is a big distinction between "poverty eradication" and "poverty alleviation."

Poverty eradication (or elimination) means doing away with absolute poverty or the severe deprivation of basic needs (food, shelter, etc.). It is the job of structuring society so that there exists at least a minimum standard of living below which no one should be allowed to fall.

Poverty alleviation (or mitigation) means lessening the impact of poverty on vulnerable parts of the population by providing relief programmes, emergency hand-outs, etc. It is the job of welfare, safety-net approaches aimed at target groups of destitute people.

Put simply, poverty eradication is a long-term development approach that treats people as subjects, involving them in productive activities that support sustainable livelihoods. On the other hand, poverty alleviation is a short-term relief approach that treats people as objects, providing them with welfare assistance to meet immediate needs but not changing the structures of society.

The second point is that here in Zambia we are lacking policies aimed at substantial poverty eradication and effective poverty alleviation. All of these policies are not simply governmental programmes, but include also the activities of the private sector and the citizenry as a whole. Investment and hard work are as necessary as government actions.

But simply take a look at the efforts to meet the increasing problem of poverty in Zambia since the birth of the Third Republic. We are aware of the fact that the World Bank

estimates over 80% of Zambians live in households that lack adequate means to meet basic daily needs (over 90% in many rural areas). Such a sad fact surely calls for concerted efforts to address the human suffering involved in poverty.

PRACTICAL STEPS

According to Ngoma, the Windhoek meeting looked at some practical steps to deal with poverty, including (1) linking poverty reduction to the budgetary process, (2) increasing the involvement of civil society, (3) improving people's access to productive assets such as land, and (4) targeting education and health services for the poor.

Zambian efforts would receive a mixed score in implementing these important practical steps.

(1) A strong critique of the budgetary process over the past several years is that it does not take an effective approach to poverty reduction. Sometimes the budget simply ignores poverty -- as the Catholic Commission on Justice and Peace (CCJP) sharply noted about the 1997 Budget Address of the Minister of Finance and Economic Development. To say that a focus on "economic growth" is a poverty reduction approach is simply not accurate, as demonstrated again and again in a variety of countries both rich and poor. We have to ask: what sort of growth? Who participates in the growth? Who benefits from the growth and who suffers from the growth? And is the growth sustainable? While economic growth may be a *necessary* condition for dealing with poverty, it is not *sufficient* condition.

The budgetary process in Zambia -- a responsibility of government -- must be more realistic in dealing, for example, with employment issues. The fact that formal sector employment in Zambia has declined from over 29% of total employment in 1984 to 19% in 1994 is not a healthy sign. Informal sector activity such as street vending may be a reality throughout the world, but no strong national economy anywhere is built on a predominant and growing informal sector.

(2) Civil society -- the private sector and non-governmental organisations -- have two tasks in combating poverty. The first is to provide jobs, encourage skills-training, meet emergency needs, and contribute to overall sustainable economic growth. The second is to be advocates on behalf of the poor, challenging both the government and themselves to take more seriously the issues of social development.

But how many private businesses, either long-time Zambian companies or newly-arriving outside investors -- put poverty reduction high on their agenda? Do they sufficiently realise that poverty is bad for business? Take the case of privatisation -- an important and potentially beneficial contributor to development in Zambia today. There is need to monitor the impact on people of privatisation, in terms of jobs, social benefits, family displacements, prices of basics, etc. This is something we do not usually hear about, for instance, in the recent television adverts for ZPA.

And as regards the NGOs, their advocacy efforts are often interpreted by the current government as partisan attacks or dismissed as irrelevant to the real world of hard economics. In Zambia there never will be involvement of civil society in combating poverty unless all parties take seriously that this involvement will necessarily mean challenging as well as supporting, criticising as well as praising.

(3) Improving people's access to productive assets is necessary to get the poor involved in eliminating poverty. Land, credit, markets, implements -- these are the assets

that turn people from being recipients of welfare programmes to becoming productive actors in a growing economy. To take simply the first asset mentioned, we can see why the current discussions surrounding the Land Act are so important for the future of dealing with poverty in Zambia. The fact that these discussions have been controversial is simply a sign that access to land by Zambians, especially poor peasants, is central to true social development in the future. To attack the questioning around the Land Act as simply "politicking" is to miss the point and to risk dealing effectively with a major component of our desired anti-poverty approach.

(4) The health and education sector in Zambia has suffered from the constraints of a rapid and rigid Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). While there have certainly been some improvements that deserve applause, by and large access by the poor to health services has been curtailed due to fees (and erratic conditions such as non-availability of drugs and non-presence of medical personnel), and percentages of enrolment and retention in schools have declined, especially among girl children.

People, whether poor or not, deserve good health and education services, as a basic human right. Zambia has agreed to that by signing on to both the United Nations Charter on Human Rights and the Organisation of African Unity Charter on Human and People's Rights. Basic service of mind and body is not a commodity subject simply to free market operations! But good health and education services are also essential for moving the country forward by strengthening the human capital resource base. Getting Zambians out of poverty is not possible without much more effective commitment to improving our health and education services.

A SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATION

In order to move beyond simply more words to actual deeds, Zambia needs a more focused effort in combating poverty. The effort should involve the relevant government agencies and all major stakeholders among NGOs, the business and labour communities, donor representatives, etc. One specific recommendation would be to resuscitate and strengthen the Poverty Alleviation Task Force originally based in NCDP. This Task Force should be located in a powerful government ministry that will provide its base of influence and should be charged with promoting, coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating both government and private sector policies and programmes.

One of the conclusions from the Windhoek meeting that Mr. Ngoma reported was that "combating poverty is not a question of resources but an issue of politics, policies and priorities." If Zambia is to move toward poverty eradication politics, policies and priorities, the proposed Task Force is an important first step. Why wait?

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