

Article

May 30th, 2023

Poverty in Early-Childhood Development: A Perpetuator of Future Poverty

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The Outlook

Zambia remains in debt distress and urgently requires debt relief. In 2020, Zambia became the first sovereign state to default on its debt obligations given the onset of COVID-19 which drastically weakened the country's fiscal integrity. Weak fiscal discipline, excessive non-concessional borrowing, and falling copper prices caused external debt to jump from 6.7 percent of GDP in 2011 to 66.4 percent in 2019, and to over 100 percent at the end of 2022 (World Bank, 2023).

On Paper

To curb macro-economic and micro-economic uncertainties caused by the wobbling effects of the pandemic, Zambia entered into a USD 1.3 billion Extended Credit Facility (ECF) with the IMF for a duration of 38 months in order to restore its macroeconomic stability and encourage higher, more sustainable and more inclusive growth and development. This facility is also aimed at supporting the national government's programme for economic reform focused on maintaining sustainable debt levels, increasing social expenditure and raising economic standards. The country received *her* first disbursement of USD 195 million (K3 billion) in September 2022. This disbursement has gone a long way in supporting the 2023 National Budget, which has seen increased allocation to the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) from K4 billion to K4.4 billion (K28 million per constituency); K3.7 billion from K3.1 billion for the Social Cash Transfer, K17.4 billion from K13.9 billion for health, and K23 billion for education.

The Abiding Reality

Irrespective of the aforementioned, poverty continues to have a significant physical and mental brunt on early-childhood development in Zambia. In totality, the country remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with an estimated 62% of *her* 19.6 million population living below the poverty line. Poverty itself worsened with the onset of COVID-19, which saw an increase in urban poverty and stifled poverty for the rural population (this is however predicted by the World Bank, to revert to pre-pandemic levels by 2025). Early childhood is a critical period for biophysical development. When poverty continues to have a lasting effect on children's health and well-being, effects such as poor early childhood development in the form of malnutrition manifests – with an estimated 40% of children in Zambia under the age of five

(5) suffering from stunting due to lack of proper nutrition. This entails poor physical growth and cognitive development, as well as increased vulnerability to the long arm of disease, weakened immune systems, and poor mental health.

Children raised in poverty are likely to experience stress, anxiety, and depression than their more affluent (well-to-do) peers. These mental health issues owing to the inability of households to meet necessary needs can lead to social and emotional difficulties that may persist into adulthood. In addition to physical and mental health concerns, poverty has the proclivity to impact a child's academic and societal outcomes, with children living in poverty often having limited access to educational and motivational resources necessary for stimulation, such as school amenities (books, laboratories, libraries, and computers), an inequitable pupil-teacher ratio, and the lack of socio-economic or socio-cultural activity in the area. These disparities can weigh heavily on academic achievement and reduce opportunities for future success extending beyond childhood, into adulthood; with a lowered earning potential and heightened rates of unemployment; congruently perpetuating endless cycles of poverty that can be difficult to break.

In conclusion, poverty can have a significant impact on a child's early childhood development, with potential long-term consequences that can persist through generations. To uproot this seemingly bottomless abattoir of generational poverty, it is essential to address the needs of children from a tender age to ensure they have the best possible start in life. This can only be achieved through bolstering deliberate efforts to improve the lives of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups of our society.

Recommendations

1. Zambia's debt must be restructured to sustainable levels to allow the country to reboot its economy.
2. In mitigating the negative effects of poverty on early childhood development, it is essential for the government to address the root causes of poverty, such as lack of access to education and healthcare facilities, inadequate housing, and insufficient socio-economic opportunities.
3. To ensure every child has the best possible start to life, the government must enhance access to high-quality early childhood education in a manner of equity in the rural-urban context.
4. In planning for more GDP growth and internalising sustainable debt relief, the government of Zambia must consider the creation of microcosm societies (charter cities) at constituency and ward level (where necessary), through public-private partnerships (PPPs); allowing for localised investments. This will sanction localised access to trade, industry and healthcare.

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