

IS ZAMBIA POOR? CAN MEETINGS HELP US?

Peter Henriot

In a powerful and well-researched letter in THE POST of Saturday 03 September, Nchima Nchito Junior provides us with figures and analysis about how much poverty there is in Zambia and what money is spent by Government on priorities not always pro-poor. He asks a simple concluding question: "Is Zambia poor?"

Three very important meetings were held last week in Lusaka that addressed from three different angles this question of poverty in Zambia. The first was a "National Stakeholders' Workshop" sponsored by the Ministry of Finance and National Planning to review the draft of the Zambia Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Report 2005. The second was a two-day conference hosted by Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR) to reach consensus on civil society's input into the National Development Plan (NDP). And the third was a two-day public convention on the draft Constitution which brought together the many segments of society associated with the Oasis Forum.

Poverty and Hunger

Much of the theoretical debate about poverty in Zambia is definitions and statistics, while the reality on the ground is hunger and hopelessness. This was very obvious during the MDG meeting. Can Zambia meet the ambitious goals set by the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2005 and agreed to by our own Government, goals that would mean a halving of extreme poverty and hunger by 2015? According to the draft report, there is potential of meeting the goal of bringing people out of extreme poverty, but it is unlikely that we can bring them away from hunger. The report asserts that other goals are more likely, including a promise of universal primary education with gender equality and a halt to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

CSO statistics say that in 1990 58% of the people were living in extreme poverty and in 2003 45%. In 1990, 25% of the people were living in extreme hunger and in 2003 28%. On the basis of these figures and taking into consideration factors such as new poverty reduction programmes and improved agricultural policies, the Government is optimistic about overall trends.

But what does it mean for people to get out of poverty but still be hungry? That's where the reality on the ground becomes very hard indeed. During the MDG meeting, the Minister of Finance and National Planning repeated his oft-asserted thesis that there is not serious poverty in Zambia, citing personal experiences of well-being in his uncle's village. But others argued that a visit to a Lusaka compound or to a remote area in the Western Province would show plenty of poverty in very practical terms – the hunger for food, for clean water, for education, for healthcare, for housing, etc.

But it seems to me that however one defines poverty and whatever statistics one wants to use, it simply is not helpful to run away from the hard facts of life faced by the majority of people every day. Many Zambians enjoy three meals a day. But most can't say that. Therefore we have the other shocking examples of the MDG report, for instance, a dramatic increase in maternal mortality ratio, a very high infant mortality ratio, the limited access to safe drinking water and good sanitation.

National Planning

To be sure, there is some good news in the MDG report and Government, civil society and cooperating partners should be commended for their efforts to improve people's lives. Obviously more efforts are needed to build upon some successes. That's where the discussions during the second meeting assume importance. The NDP is an effort to push forward the earlier Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) with policies designed to "create wealth" as well as eradicate poverty. Civil society participants from all over Zambia attended the meeting, offering their recommendations on what should be priorities for national policies over the next six years.

There was concern expressed by some attendees at the conference as to whether an explicit poverty focus was being blurred or weakened in the Government's orientation in the NDP. Remember that the first PRSP was put in place because it was a "condition" imposed by the IMF and World Bank for Zambia to reach the HIPC completion point. Once that HIPC point has been attained (or so we hope!), will a priority of poverty reduction give way to other priorities? Will pro-poor policies be the outcome of all these discussions?

Good Constitutional Governance

And that is why the third meeting of the week was very important. There simply will be no pro-poor policies without pro-people governance. And there will be no pro-people governance without a people-oriented Constitution. And there will be no people-oriented Constitution without a people-participative process!

The dynamic shift at the Oasis Forum convention from discussing *content* issues to focusing primarily on *process* steps reveals why a Constituent Assembly is so necessary. It is undeniably true that Zambia will never have the proverbial "Constitution that will stand the test of time" unless it is a Constitution that means what it says in the Preamble: "We the People." Given the mode and mood of the current Ruling Party and its Government, it appears that it will only be through a Constituent Assembly that the people will effectively and equitably participate in the process of adopting the fundamental law of the land.

It seems to me that the major achievement of the Oasis Forum convention is not the dramatic call for peaceful demonstrations but the wise decision to keep process as a priority. Constitutional content has been ably presented in the Mung'omba CRC recommendations (backed in many instances by the recommendations of the Electoral Reform Technical Commission). Surely the content needs debate and refining. But the content will never get fair treatment without a process in which the people can truly participate.

So we are back to the evident point that Zambia won't have pro-poor policies without pro-people governance! I've heard some people say that "ordinary" Zambians (whatever that adjective connotes?) would prefer more action on meeting hunger in the country than on designing a new Constitution. "People can't eat constitutional drafts," they argue! But history demonstrates that without good constitutional rule a country is fraught with mis-management and conflicts – a sure environment for poverty and hunger among the majority of the people.

I think we can learn a lot from last week's series of meetings. The MDG workshop shows that we can move forward if we put priorities in the right place; The NDP conference shows that all policies must keep poverty eradication as the priority. The Oasis Forum convention shows that commitment to a Constituent Assembly is essential for good governance that makes good priorities.

Someone told me that if a country could be developed by meetings and reports, Zambia would be an “over-developed” country! Well, let’s hope and pray and act that the meetings and reports of last week will at least move us a bit more forward.

[1150 words]

Peter Henriot is director of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) in Lusaka.
E-mail: phenriot@zamnet.zm