

The State of Education in Zimbabwe - a Dream Shattered

A WOZA perspective – February 2009

Background

Last week, the political parties proceeded to implement their power-sharing deal. This is the first step in the formation of a transitional government that is to oversee reforms, come up with a new constitution and then conduct an election. Zimbabweans have had to stand by and observe this process without being given the opportunity to participate, and perhaps they will feel that they have no choice but to continue to watch and wait for these developments to lessen their hardships. Many promises were made in the Global Political Agreement that have been ignored, so we should not be surprised if the trend continues.

But what should Zimbabweans do? Our role is to put maximum pressure on all the parties to this agreement to address our issues and our priorities. We must not wait for 100 days to pass and complain that nothing is happening. Every day matters and every day we should be speaking out and demanding change. Especially as most schools in the country have still not opened.

Education – a dream shattered

We as a people have always valued the education of our children more than anything else. For that we sell our precious beasts, work two jobs, travel across borders, go into exile, buy less food and once joined the liberation struggle. We hang the hard-earned certificates on the unpainted walls of our small homes, and ululate at the graduations. An educated son or daughter is our pride and joy, the fulfillment of years of struggle.

After Independence ZANU PF seemed to understand this burning desire of Zimbabweans, resources were allocated to the ministries of education and an expansion of schooling followed in the 1980's. Although there was still more that could have been done, by the mid-1990's we could boast of teachers' colleges training qualified teachers by the thousands, universities producing graduates to teach A-level, graduates obtaining further degrees to become college and university lecturers. We were the envy of Africa, with 90% adult literacy by 2002 and 98% youth literacy. Our school leavers could obtain places for tertiary education anywhere in the world, but they did not need to leave Zimbabwe, because our universities were developing and providing training in almost any field.

Teaching was a respected profession at one time, a teacher the most educated person in a rural community, a resource of knowledge to be shared. Teachers were never highly paid, but they could buy the necessities and some luxuries. Many even retired on a decent pension.

Who could have believed that we could sink so low as to reach the situation we are in today? Only private tertiary institutions function, government universities, colleges and schools are closed. The rot began many years ago; by 2001 the number of school-aged children not in school was already higher than in 1991, literacy rates had started to fall by 2002 and qualified teachers had begun leaving Zimbabwe by 2003. But the worst devastation has come in the past four years. Schools are closed because there are no teachers; teachers are not there because they have been chased away from their classrooms by the meager wage offered by government. Large numbers of them have opted to swim across the crocodile infested Limpopo River to seek a living wage in South Africa.

WOZA believe that a once vibrant education system, along with our children's lives, has been destroyed by political interference. The Mugabe regime stole from the education budget to fund political campaigns and pay an overstaffed intelligence department. They could not provide funding for schools, classrooms, textbooks and teachers salaries, and so today, in 2009 we have no education except for those few rich people who send their children to private schools. Even the defense forces whose activities were resourced at the sacrifice of the education system cannot afford to send their children to school.

Those teachers who remain in Zimbabwe have been forced to supplement their salaries by trading, by selling sweets, by turning their classrooms into market places. Some have survived by charging fees for

teaching children after hours. Where is the valued teacher of old, the community leader to whom everyone showed respect? That teacher cannot survive without a salary, the teacher cannot survive when being threatened and insulted instead of valued and encouraged for the work being done. The work that teacher was doing cannot not be done by school leavers or uneducated war veterans who think teaching is a matter of shouting and punishing. The knowledge and skill that teachers possess has been scorned and devalued by people who seem not to care about the future of our families, our communities and our nation. They don't understand the many years of work by so many thousands of educators, which went gone into building what was once such a respected education system. And now all that is destroyed. Our teachers are all over the world, the lucky ones teaching, the less lucky working in factories, in construction, as domestics, and the most unfortunate starving on street corners in the cities of every continent.

An education system also needs school buildings, furniture, stationery and textbooks. All of these need money. Money comes from a functioning economy and the willingness of a government to allocate funds. These funds should not be expected to come from parents. We fought for the right to free education, and thought we had gained that right. Now it has been taken away; now there is no education in Zimbabwe; now our children are starving for food and starving for the learning, which will enable them to become productive adults.

The State of Education in 2008

In August 2008 WOZA undertook a survey of our membership. We interviewed a sample of more than 1,000 members in Bulawayo, Harare and Chitungwiza. We asked them about how they are living, and we asked them about the education of their children.

- 15% said they have school-age children who are not going to school.
- Only 37% said their children were able to attend classes regularly.
- Only 5% said there were enough teachers, and 3% said there were enough textbooks.
- Less than 10% had a chair and a desk for each child at the school.
- 70% said their children had been sent away from school because they had not paid fees on time, or paid the levy, or paid a fees top-up.
- 66% had failed to buy uniforms when they were needed and 60% had had their children sent away from school for not having correct uniform.
- 47% had had their children sent away from school because there were no teachers.

This survey was conducted in urban areas. Rural schools were by and large in worse conditions.

These figures come from August – before the chaos and confusion of the third term of 2008. When there had already been major disruptions earlier in the year - classes cancelled due to elections, schools appropriated by thugs as centers to create violence, teachers' absences because they could not afford transport to school. Children were expected to write public exams without having done any learning. The exams were conducted in confusion. We don't even know if professionals were employed to mark the exams so cannot trust the results. Some were told to bring a chair to sit on to write their exams, many were required to provide a ream of paper with their exam fees.

Children hardly learnt in 2008 and many will need to repeat the year. Many parents are prepared to see their children repeat rather than remain substandard due to the time missed. But are the schools in a position to offer anything at all to our children?

We hear the Prime Minister asking teachers to go back to school but what will they do there? Results were not released; there is no stationery and no furniture. Charging huge amounts of money in foreign currency will not bring children to school as their parents do not have US \$200 to pay. Parents are not to blame for the political disaster that killed schooling. Parents cannot pay teachers - should they when that is why there is a government with a minister of education?

The Way Forward

We will not allow 2009 to be a repeat of 2008. We demand our children get a decent quality education and demand free schooling and free levies in 2009. Our children cannot be made to suffer for the politics and mismanagement. Very few can afford to pay school fees in foreign currency. Those who did would be the privileged, those who benefited from the chaos of our current situation. No, as Zimbabweans we are not prepared to have education provided to only a few.

These are our demands to the new government:

1. Declare the education system a national disaster and we will participate in asking the international community to support teacher's salaries and infrastructure in schools. We will help source donor funding and allocate revenues from Zimbabwean recovery to education.
2. Reduce the size of the armed forces and the CIO and allocate the money saved to education.
3. Sell the expensive cars allocated to government officials and use the money to buy text books.
4. Consult us and together we can design a fee structure that will enable all children to go to school.
5. Introduce a non-politicized assistance programme for those children who cannot afford the fees.
6. Begin a campaign to lure teachers home with adequate salaries, and adequate supplies, furniture and equipment in schools.
7. Open schools as soon as 50% of the required teachers are in place.
8. The rest of 2009 should be devoted to repeating the previous year – hence no grade 0 intake.
9. 2008 exams should be discounted and rewritten in 2009 at no extra cost to parents. If we cannot administer our own exams we ask a donor to fund that administration and import specialists to implement it.
10. Political interference in the administration of schools must cease and professionals must run education.

We call on teachers to do the following:

1. Understand the plight of Zimbabwean parents and children is the same as your plight.
2. Make reasonable demands for a living wage, in keeping with what will be affordable by government
3. Return to your classrooms only when you are sure there will be a living wage. You will need you to work hard without distractions like trading in the classrooms and absences from work to make money. With an adequate wage, cease your demands for payment from parents.

We call on parents to do the following:

1. Teach your children to value education and learning.
2. Instill in them a discipline that has been lost over the past year of chaos.
3. Participate in community activities that can resurrect our schools as centres of excellence.
4. Be patient but vigilant as the new government reorganizes our schools, and ensure that the policies are in the interests of the majority of the people.

We are watching and waiting. We believe that together we can rebuild schools that will once again be the envy of the region. But the primary responsibility lies on this government to deliver on promises, to allocate funds and to make them work for our children.

WOMEN OF ZIMBABWE ARISE (WOZA)

WHAT IS OUR MISSION: Women and men of WOZA are conducting a non-violent campaign. Our aim is to mobilise Zimbabweans to demand social justice from their leaders. The time has come to put the past behind us and start building a better tomorrow. We will hold existing leaders accountable and mobilise people to the movement to demand leaders who will deliver all aspects of social justice and a genuinely people-driven constitution.

DREAMING OF A NEW ZIMBABWE - THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER

Zimbabweans, united and resolute, announce:

That after 27 years of independence, the freedoms and equal opportunities we were promised have not been fulfilled;

The dreams we had of a good life – of dignity, comfort and security - have become nightmares. Zimbabweans must dream once again and turn their dreams into a living reality.

We must keep in mind, however, that we deserve better and we must not be afraid to believe that we have the right to a brighter future and we have the right to contribute to building it.

And therefore, we, the people of Zimbabwe, women, men and children, of all races, tribes and religions, come together with respect for each other and as equals to adopt this Charter, knowing that united we can deliver its possibilities;

And we undertake to work together with strength, courage and hope, until all Zimbabweans can live in a genuinely democratic country in peace and with dignity.

Educating the Nation

Every child shall have equal access to an education without any form of discrimination. Those who cannot afford it shall have access to financial assistance;

Primary education shall be free and secondary education affordable as we were promised in 1980;

All students shall have a good quality education, taught in classrooms with enough resources – books, desks and equipment.

There shall be enough qualified teachers committed to educating the next generation. We must respect their contribution enough to give them a living wage.