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The Pursuit of Higher Education in Zimbabwe: A Futile Effort?

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Article at a glance

- Poverty and economic hardship can either mobilize people to fight for quality education and a better future, or drive them away from education. The latter is disastrous to society in the long run, but it is the path many people in Zimbabwe have taken in recent years.
- The education system in Zimbabwe has long suffered from an insufficient focus on teaching practical skills, limited access to higher education opportunities, and unequal access for girls to specialized fields such as science.
- Successful educational reform is a necessary step to create the basis for sustained economic growth and requires the involvement of all stakeholders, ranging from families and civil society to national and local governments as well as the private sector.



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The Zimbabwean Context

“Why have you returned home? You should have searched for employment where you were. It is better to be a maid overseas than anything here!” These were the sentiments echoed by family and friends upon my return from studies abroad. The disbelief in everyone’s eyes was evident, and within the next few weeks I began to understand their reaction.

After attaining independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean economy experienced a period of growth. Although key social indicators were improving, the 1990s witnessed a turnaround of economic fortunes and a downward spiral began. From 1991 to 1995, real GDP grew about 1.5 percent per year, after which, the country started experiencing negative growth. Extreme poverty increased significantly during this time, with an estimated 20 percent of households living below the Food Poverty Line in 1995, and staggering 48 percent in 2003.¹ Life expectancy at birth, which was 61 years in 1990, was estimated at 43 years for the period between 2000 and 2005.

Currently, the economy suffers from ever-escalating inflation levels. In 1980, the Zimbabwe dollar was worth about US\$ 1.50. Since then, deterioration of the economy has severely devalued the currency, while inflation reached 3,713.9 percent in April 2007 and is exponentially growing.

Beyond rampant inflation, price distortions for key commodities and utilities, high unemployment rates, rising poverty levels, foreign exchange and commodity product shortages, deteriorating public services, rising inequalities, and large income disparities characterize the Zimbabwean economy.

Educational Reforms in Zimbabwe

The country’s education system has undergone major transformations since attaining independence. These changes have included both quantitative and qualitative reforms.² Having its roots in a colonial legacy, the Zimbabwean education system was characterized by an unequal provision of resources between white and black communities. To address these inequalities,

the education system underwent major reforms over the past 20 years.

The first major reform was the amalgamation of the separate education systems present before independence. The reforms in the first decade focused on increasing the number of registered schools and colleges. In 1980, there were five teachers’ colleges, two polytechnic colleges, and one university. The high demand for education resulted in new facilities and increased enrolment. By 1990, teachers’ colleges had increased to 14, technical colleges to eight, and two new vocational training centres (VTCs) were established – but there remained only one university.³

Educational reforms since 1990 were more focused on the relevance and quality of education. They included new approaches to curriculum content, new technologies and teaching methodologies, skills provision, decentralization of colleges, and the establishing of college advisory boards. The 1999 Presidential Commission on Education and Training recommended a wide range of educational reforms with a primary focus on teacher education, the sciences, technology, and skills.

These recommendations led to the establishment of the Scientific and Industrial Research Development Centre (SIRDC) with the mandate to conduct research in industry and link it with higher learning. Concerning teacher education, several programmes were introduced and integrated into the system, such as population education, HIV and AIDS education, and informal sector training.

In the past several years, many of the country’s tertiary institutions have successfully computerized their operations through Educational Management Information Systems (EMIS). At the same time, technology and computer use have become more common at all levels of education.

The effects of these reforms have been eroded by the adverse economic climate. Documented successes have been reversed and program implementation has been challenged by the lack of continuity and resources to move from policy to action.

Youth Education and Employment

Zimbabwe's unemployment is highest among the 15-19 and the 20-24 age groups, with rates of 27 percent and 22 percent, respectively. The structural unemployment⁴ rate ranged from 57 to 63 percent in 2003, and was also higher for the 15-19 and 20-24 age groups.⁵

Education is conventionally thought to bring private benefits through increased earnings, as higher wages are expected for more educated workers. But education brings greater social benefits as well through creating a skilled workforce capable of propelling economic growth and development. Therefore, education should equip individuals with skills to compete better in the knowledge-based economy. Studies have shown that investment in human capital leads to increased earning capacity with greater private and social returns from higher educational attainment. One study found that in Uganda, mean wages were higher for more educated workers, and that wage earnings were 30 percent higher for people who completed secondary education than those with only completed primary education.⁶

Several factors affect both the educational process and youth employment. The 2003 Poverty Assessment Study Survey found the major reasons given for being unemployed in Zimbabwe were lack of skills and inability to find suitable work. The issues surrounding education and employment problems are interlinked; hence, education and economic reform efforts are mutually reinforcing and should be pursued concurrently.

The Economy Matters

The economic environment is a major inhibiting factor to educational attainment and job creation. Cuts in education expenditures due to negative economic growth and low investment have compromised the development of Zimbabwe's human capital in recent years. The allocations to the three education ministries (the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, and the Ministry of Science and Technology) have been declining as a share of the national budget over the

past years. The allocation to the Ministry of Education in 2007 was just 8.94 percent of the national budget, a reduction from the 19.24 percent in 2006; of that, employment costs make up 77.45 percent of the Ministry's budget, with only 15.02 percent allocated for operations and educational development.⁷ This small portion is meant to cover the implementation of vast projects, including building schools and educational infrastructure, and introducing new educational programs.

With the prevailing economic hardships faced by the majority of people in Zimbabwe, parents and guardians lack resources for education costs to the detriment of their children's schooling. Education in Zimbabwe requires payment of tuition fees at all levels – a huge financial burden on parents. The 2006 introduction of tuition fees in state universities resulted in a major public outcry because of the increased cost for families. These fees caused a great reduction in student enrolment at state universities, as most could no longer afford the expense.

Education for Better Employment, Growth, and Development

Advancing one's education in the face of mounting economic obstacles in Zimbabwe is increasingly viewed as more money spent with high perceived opportunity cost of schooling. People are focused on the present rather than investing in human capital for higher returns in the future. The nation has developed myopic behavior and singular thinking. The main goal of each young person leaving the educational system is to find whatever employment they can, usually in other countries. Annually, 0.6 percent of the population is estimated to migrate abroad.

The harsh economic reality is crowding out ambitions of career and entrepreneurial development, while prioritizing the necessity of mere financial survival. People no longer view education as a means of personal – and national – development because the payoff is not immediate. In the 1980s and 1990s, parents encouraged their children to study to become doctors and lawyers, because of the perception that these professions were profitable. More recently,

however, the objective of many parents is to find a way to send their children overseas to work as soon as they finish secondary school. This has had an adverse effect on the economy, as there is a huge loss of productive workers to countries like the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Botswana.

This mass exodus has led to shortages of qualified workers, particularly in the education sector, compromising the quality of education delivered. Coupled with low productivity, low investment levels, and low growth, the result is decreased human capital, which further undermines the quality of the workforce in Zimbabwe.

Another challenge in this adverse economic environment concerns mismatched skill sets of graduating students vis-à-vis the existing job opportunities. Erich Bloch, a Zimbabwean economist, attributed the increased number of unemployed university graduates to incompatibility of employee resources and market needs.

It is common to find individuals educated in a particular field working in a completely different area because of the limited availability of jobs within their specialty area. This implies that human capital is not being used effectively and efficiently, which has an adverse effect on output and productivity levels, undermining growth and development in the country.

The Gender Dimension

“Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant mortality and maternal mortality, improve nutrition and promote health—including helping to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS,” Kofi A. Annan has said.

This sentiment expressed by the former Secretary General of the United Nations has been proven true by various studies. There are several factors that inhibit women from attaining higher levels of education:

resource constraints, early marriages, and cultural stereotypes, among others. Programs and reforms in education that do not seek to address the different situation of boys and girls will fail to adequately provide quality education and ultimately undermine the productivity of labor force.

Gender inequality in education also manifests itself in the fields of study pursued by men versus women, leading them to particular careers. This trend may be shaped by cultural and societal factors, which classify fields of study and the corresponding careers as ‘male’ or ‘female.’ There is a general perception that boys are better suited for mathematics, science, and technology. Subjects in schools are often assigned by gender identity and attitudes toward certain subjects or careers in the classroom, home, and society all influence students’ participation.⁸

To focus just on expanding science and technology curriculum without re-orienting these subjects to focus on both boys’ and girls’ education would do nothing to promote gender equality in education and employment.

The low enrolment of females in science-related disciplines could be attributed to the fact that fewer females opt for science subjects at secondary school. One study of secondary school children in Zimbabwe found that school subjects were gender-typed on the basis of perceived ability to master them, as well as the occupations that they led to: “Science is good for boys. They can be mechanics and doctors. Girls cannot do such jobs,” said one respondent in that study.⁹

The social outcomes of such unequal education opportunities are clear. The Poverty Assessment Study Survey of 2003 showed that more males than females were in key occupations such as company directors and managers (only one out five are female), engineers and technicians (one in twenty-five female), law and security (three in fifty female), and transport (one in fifty female). Women meanwhile dominated cross-border trading (71 percent), life sciences professions (almost three in five female), and agriculture (seven in ten female).

Enhancing Employability and Entrepreneurship through Educational Reform

Access to Information

Schools should promote and develop career guidance programs to equip students with reliable information on career prospects. Such programs should emphasize the link between higher levels of education and the private and social rate of return. Ensuring guidance counselors are gender sensitive will help girls venture into careers that they otherwise would not. The Ministry of Education should also provide skilled career and vocational guidance in schools to ensure that students make informed decisions about their future. An important aspect of this is conducting regular analyses of school drop-out rates and providing students who leave school with information on what jobs and training they can pursue.

Cultivating Life Skills

The Zimbabwean curriculum is very theoretical and exam-oriented, which produces individuals unable to deal with the challenges of the real work environment. There is a need for development of a life skills-based curriculum, with teachers' manuals that indicate how existing subjects can be used to impart various life skills. Of importance is ensuring that education professionals are clear about what life skills are. In one study, education professionals equated life skills to practical subjects such as home economics, carpentry, or agriculture.¹⁰ Investment in the quality of education and promoting post-secondary skills development also equips individuals with practical and relevant skills for the labor market.

Engaging the Business Sector

There is little engagement between students and employers. Interaction between the business sector and schools benefits both the youth and employers. The transition from school to employment is eased by the development of students' responsible attitudes towards work. In turn, raised aspirations come about from increased knowledge and prospects of a better

future and lead to improved academic performance. Partnerships between schools and businesses could form through teachers visiting businesses, employers visiting schools, and businesses and schools incorporating short trainee placements into the course of study.

Gender Mainstreaming in Education and Training

Education reforms should aim at strategies that afford equal opportunity to boys and girls. Increased productivity and economic growth will come from bringing gender equality into education. The government's role to facilitate gender equality in education comprises implementing appropriate policies, providing the necessary resources, and ensuring that there is relevant expertise within the education sector.

It is also important that when resources are allocated to gender-sensitive education policies, adequate follow-up should occur to determine whether the programs were effective and well targeted. Reforms should also aim to promote informal education programs that empower women by teaching essential skills and emphasizing the equality of opportunity. For instance, introduction of entrepreneurial development programs at an early stage in education will equip female students to think innovatively and strategically about their career options.

Education reforms should also promote women in science and technology and incorporate gender training for teachers and instructors in schools. A study in Zambia found that teachers valued and encouraged boys' participation in class more than girls, and tended to allocate tasks along gender lines.¹¹

It is important for all teachers to receive gender awareness training to prevent perpetuating stereotypes and make science and technology subjects more gender inclusive. Misconceptions and gender stereotyping should be addressed at an early stage in the education process so that young women can be better prepared to pursue more diverse careers.

Reforming Education in Zimbabwe

In every country, there are numerous stakeholders facilitating education reform, with different roles and levels of accountability, including parents, local communities and businesses, Civil Society Organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations, teachers, administrators, national and local governments, and the global community. Promoting education and youth employment requires integrated strategies at all these levels.

The need for involvement in promoting education in the Zimbabwean society stems from the interdependence between educational attainment and development outcomes. Though reforms in the education sector are typically initiated by government, all stakeholders have a role to play. Parents need to create an enabling environment for their children to participate fully in school activities, project positive expectations of children's achievements, and encourage them to reach for higher levels of education. The government has the responsibility of providing adequate budgetary allocations to the education sector, monitor the proper distribution of these funds, and provide equal access to education. The Ministry of Information and Publicity should provide information to the public on the merits of education and information on available support programs such as scholarships. Finally, the private sector, schools, and civil society organizations need to work together to provide students with opportunities for practical training and to make sure they have the skills necessary in the marketplace.

Conclusion

Because of the current economic environment, it is not surprising that young people in Zimbabwe would forgo educational opportunities and take any job available, even when it is not suited to their skills, or migrate to work abroad simply to support themselves. But in the long run, this trend is detrimental to the economy and the society, since it reinforces a vicious cycle of poverty and unemployment that is difficult to break. The result is lower human capital and a brain drain, which leaves the country with little skilled labor that can create employment and promote productivity

and development. The question is, do we lose hope in education and flee? If the answer is no, we need to come up with strategies that reward educational attainment and reduce poverty by promoting economic growth and job creation. Together with those policies, the key issues of equal access to education for boys and girls, improved graduation rates, better access to higher education, and enhanced life skills development need more attention.

Notes

- ¹ PASS 2003
- ² Zimbabwean educationalist, Dr. Samuel Mumbengegwi, outlined these changes in his paper, "Quality Education for All: Knowledge, Technology and the Future of Higher Education"
- ³ Mumbengegwi, S. "Quality Education for All: Knowledge, Technology and the Future of Higher Education"
- ⁴ Structural unemployment is unemployment that comes from an absence of demand for the workers that are available.
- ⁵ PASS 2003
- ⁶ Appleton 2001
- ⁷ Ministry of Finance 2006
- ⁸ Mwetulundila 2001
- ⁹ Gordon 1998
- ¹⁰ Dyanda and Mavuna 2004
- ¹¹ UNICEF 2003

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CIPE's 2007 International Youth Essay Competition asked young people aged 18-30 to share their ideas about citizenship, democratic and market-oriented reform, and youth leadership. Roselyn Sekai Kapungu's essay, which received the third place in the 'Educational Reform and Employment' category, was written in response to the question: How can your country reform the educational system to give young people the right skills and opportunities to enter the workforce? To learn more about the essay competition, visit www.cipe.org/essay.

Roselyn Sekai Kapungu received a bachelor's degree in economics at the University of Zimbabwe in 2003. She was awarded a scholarship to study in Norway at the Norwegian University of Life Science, where she earned a master's degree in development and resource economics in 2006. Soon after returning home, she took an internship at the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRCN), working on a gender budgeting project. In early 2007, she was made a permanent employee of ZWRCN and is now working as the information officer (research and publications).

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