



Education in Zimbabwe: Working Together for a Better Future

Summary of London Conference, 22-23 July

Overview

Following a successful seminar in Harare on the 12-13 July, Link Community Development and the Commonwealth Consortium for Education working with the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, hosted a conference on behalf of the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education in London on 22-23 July. Hon. Senator David Coltart, Minister of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, addressed the conference which focussed on the revitalisation of the education sector in Zimbabwe.

The conference set out to inform a UK and international audience of the realities facing Zimbabwean education, including steps being taken to improve the situation, the Ministry's interim plan, current support from existing partners, and opportunities for future co-operation. The conference was attended by delegates from over 50 international organisations, NGOs, academic institutions, teachers' unions, high commissions, embassies and Diaspora groups.

The process so far

In his opening remarks, Steve Blunden, CEO of Link Community Development emphasised the importance of Ministry ownership of the education agenda. The process to date had been about creating spaces for the Ministry to "work with itself" to establish the capacity to support and direct the rehabilitation of the education system. Development partners had stepped back, demonstrating that by working together they could enable the Ministry to take the lead. The Harare and London conferences represented only the start of a "long journey", but tangible progress had been made. Blunden paid tribute to the "inspiring and energetic" Senator Coltart who had made the process possible.

Minister's viewpoint

Senator Coltart made clear in his address that education in Zimbabwe is "still in a state of crisis". Teacher pay and morale, poor school infrastructure and weak governance at district and school levels continued to represent major obstacles to progress. Both Senator Coltart and his colleague Cris Bowora, Principal Director at MoESAC, cited plummeting Grade 7 pass rates – which have fallen from 67% last year to 39% this year – as "an indictment of a once glorious education system". In Coltart's terms: "We're trying to run a Rolls-Royce education system on a VW engine, most of the time without any fuel". However, the Minister was clear that many positives remain: belief in education is still high amongst parents and communities, teachers continue to teach despite pay conditions, and the administrative infrastructure remains largely in place. Moreover, positive progress had been made; Coltart cited the Education Transition Fund in particular as "an instrument that the international community can have confidence in". The Minister saw completion of the strategic plan as crucial to securing international confidence and support to move forward. He also highlighted the international significance of Zimbabwe's education system as a motivating factor for donors – further collapse would have a substantial impact in South Africa and beyond; supporting its rehabilitation should be seen as a regional imperative.

Draft Interim Plan

Cris Bowora underscored the Minister's depiction of the current state of education in Zimbabwe, providing further detail of falling exam results, the crisis in the teaching profession and deteriorating classroom infrastructure. He then set out the five strategic areas of intervention outlined in the

Ministry's Draft Interim Plan: restore the professional status of teachers; re-establish minimum conditions of learning; improve the quality of learning; reinvigorate school and system governance; and focus resources on those with greatest need. Next steps in the process would include a presentation to cabinet urging it to prioritise emergency education actions in the 2011 budget discussions; further refinement of the strategic plan including implementation strategies and costings; a comprehensive survey of facilities in every education institution; and a review of monitoring arrangements.

Existing partnerships

Next, a panel session provided an overview of current international assistance to education in Zimbabwe. Representatives from the World Bank, DFID, CCfE and the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education outlined the situation as it stands and fielded questions from a packed hall. **Peter Buckland from the World Bank** emphasised the Bank's ongoing commitment to supporting education in Zimbabwe, but warned that Zimbabwe's sizeable deficit and indebtedness to international agencies imposed constraints on its capacity to assist. Among initiatives under consideration was a survey of education facilities intended to provide baseline data to help identify priorities for reconstruction efforts. **DFID's Head of Profession for Education, Jo Bourne**, outlined the UK coalition government's current priorities in education and DFID's recent experience in Zimbabwe. Commitments going forward would be



Left to Right: Peter Buckland, World Bank, Tom Machingaidze, MoESAC, Peter Williams, CCfE, Jo Bourne, DFID

dependent on the outcomes of the internal funding review currently underway, but education development and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals were a clear priority. Bourne commended the interim plan's emphasis on quality in education – she felt that the deficiencies in children's actual learning at school, and particularly the apparent failure to master basic literacy skills, were a major concern. DFID's activities in Zimbabwe in the last year had centred around BEAM and the ETF textbook programme. The success of the latter, in particular, had set a high bar for future engagement in terms of transparency and value for money. **Peter Williams from CCfE** reiterated the urgency and immensity of external assistance needs, but also the extent to which the scale and forms of assistance provided are constrained by donor perceptions of the political situation in Zimbabwe. He also spoke of the creative and innovative mechanisms available to bypass these obstacles and the prominent role that civil society organisations are called on to play in the delivery of such assistance. Finally he noted that – within the limits imposed on it – Zimbabwe has developed a good system for cooperation with donor partners, offering promising opportunities for future collaboration.

Working group sessions

After lunch and on the following morning delegates broke up into smaller working groups to discuss areas of particular interest. These smaller sessions allowed them to explore in greater depth issues raised in the plenary sessions and to share their own experiences. Working group topics included: 1) Rehabilitation of Schools and the School System; 2) Teachers & Curriculum; 3) Options & Prioritisation in the Face of Budget Constraints; 4) Enabling Access to Education for Marginalised and Other Groups; 5)

Partnerships for Development; and 6) Skills, Diaspora and Volunteering. See our “Summary of Working Group Discussions” for further details of the ground covered and conclusions reached.

Where’s the money going to come from?

Friday’s plenary session saw Perran Penrose, Chair of Link Community Development, interview Senator Coltart on the vital theme: “Where’s the money going to come from?” The Minister gave frank and illuminating responses across a range of key funding issues. Penrose challenged the Minister on exactly how much money was needed to address the acute shortage of data and EMIS, what his main priorities were given the severe budgetary constraints, his views on Zimbabwe’s relationship with the IMF and finally, how he foresaw his relationship with the international community developing in light of the Draft Interim Plan.

Reinforcing relationships

The final afternoon’s programme comprised a series of market place sessions, which allowed delegates to meet one-on-one with the Senator and his Ministry colleagues in order to cement relationships and identify potential follow-up activity. The intention was to help both Ministry and development partners to develop sustainable channels of communication with appropriate contacts. Running parallel to these individual meetings, remaining delegates had the opportunity to view a recent documentary film about the plight of destitute children in Zimbabwe - a powerful and moving reminder of the realities of the situation on the ground.



The conference closed on a note of measured optimism. Despite the challenges involved, first steps were identified and connections with potential partners were made, paving the way for further action. Link Community Development and its partners will continue to work with the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education over the coming months in order to move the process forward.

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