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Strategies for Poverty Alleviation in Zimbabwe +

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ABSTRACT

Developing countries have now become increasingly aware of the importance of implementing development plans that are based on the aspirations of people, if poverty is to be significantly reduced. This paper thus proposes a broad, appropriate and practical strategic approach which aims to alleviate poverty in Zimbabwe through a reorientation of conventional development strategies. Emphasis is placed on basic needs fulfilment as an indispensable prerequisite for socio-economic development. The core of the paper is a realistic analysis of structural inequalities which must be tackled at national and global levels to ensure that 'Growth with Equity,' whilst safeguarding the environment. The role of social work education and practice in meeting the exigencies of the moment is also outlined.

Introduction

The vision of an egalitarian Zimbabwean society by the year 2000 envisaged after Independence in 1980 has been blurred by the failure of development programmes to alleviate poverty and reduce inequalities, particularly in the country's rural areas. As a result of market-based economic reforms, drought and other interplaying factors, the poor and disadvantaged sections of the population have become further marginalised, thus making development efforts futile. To this effect, Harrison in Osei-Hwedie (1995:93) vividly describes the process of development as, "...the often tragic story of the hopes, frustrations, efforts and failures, suffering and conflicts of thousands of people in Africa."

Indeed, the story of 'people-based' development in Zimbabwe can safely be equated to a 'development crisis,' especially after 16 years of costly failures to reduce poverty (Kamidza, 1996). This assertion can be substantiated by the fact that rural and urban poverty is on the increase in spite of rhetorical commitments to rural development. This bleak scenario is populated by other social indicators such as homelessness, high rates of unemployment, increasing crime and other forms of

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deviant behaviour. The demand for housing, water-supply, electricity, transport, education, health and other social services has therefore increased dramatically, and the situation of the poor has also been exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the hostile macro-economic environment.

According to the statistical evidence available, 62% of the Zimbabwean population is reported to be living in households with income per person below a level sufficient to provide the basic needs like food, shelter, clothing, education, access to health and other social services (Poverty Assessment Survey Report, 1996). The nationwide sectoral distribution of poverty is 81% in communal lands, 67% in resettlement areas and small-scale commercial farms, 51% in large-scale commercial farms and 46% in urban areas. If these figures are anything to go by, then they are a crude confession of unsuccessful efforts to ameliorate the suffering of the majority in Zimbabwe.

Nevertheless, we can no longer afford to be miserable about the past, neither should we be gloomy about the future, if anti-poverty strategies are to be successful. This paper therefore seeks to provide the missing link by highlighting political, social, economic and other conditions which have retarded the implementation of development strategies which are congruent with the basic needs fulfilment vision. The starting point will thus be an attempt to reconceptualise the definition of poverty, and contextualise it to the Zimbabwean situation.

Understanding Poverty: The Politics of Definition Re-conceptualised

Perceptions on poverty identification, its causes and solutions as perceived by the poor themselves, politicians, planners, practitioners, academics, and outsiders vary considerably. Hence, Dinito & Dye in Osei-Hwedie (1995) contend that the problem of defining and fighting against poverty is more of a political and technical problem than a rational activity. Alcock (1993) reiterates that there is a powerful logic to the argument that we need not look further than politics and politicians to find the causes of poverty: they run the country and are therefore responsible for the problems within it!

This implies that the problems encountered in implementing plans or policies and the failure of some development programmes in Zimbabwe can largely be attributed to many factors including a flawed definition of poverty and development, a lack of political will to undertake radical change, inadequate resources for mammoth tasks, and above all, a lack of mass participation in the development process by the poverty-stricken groups or communities so as to make them masters or (mistresses) of their own destinies (de Graff, 1986; Alcock, 1993).

The basic fact is that there is too much emphasis upon the quantification of basic needs into monetary terms, and as a result, poverty has often been treated as a purely economic issue. However, for the majority who are desperately poor in Africa, and in Zimbabwe for that matter, their poverty is also due to a "...deprivation of welfare, social power and very profoundly a lack of capabilities" (World Bank, 1995:2). In other words, being poor often means being voiceless, powerless and generally having less likelihood of breaking through the 'culture of poverty' unless one is empowered to do so through effective intervention strategies. This therefore brings to disrepute the notion of 'blaming the victim,' since poverty is evidently a multi-dimensional phenomenon with complex linkages. As such it cannot be characterised by a single index (Streeten, 1981). To be more specific, poverty in Zimbabwe is linked to other people's attitudes, to social roles or conventions, a lack of access to credit, a lack of real choice over family size, drought, structural adjustment and to a multitude of other factors.

It is therefore interesting to note that poverty is often hidden within households, and it often works to discriminate against the aged, disabled, women and children. Subsequently, it has been revealed by various studies that poverty affects men and women in different ways (Government of Zimbabwe, 1994). In fact, women in Zimbabwe face economic, legal, cultural and social discrimination on the grounds of their sex, and this affects every aspect of their lives, including their participation in community development activities (Kachingwe, 1986).

It thus becomes clear that there are many limitations of absolute approaches to poverty, because, as I have tried to illustrate, there are many social and psychological aspects at play, which, if ignored, render any mission to alleviate poverty impossible. It may thus be useful at this juncture to recap on Muzaale's (1986) description of poverty as more than just a physiological phenomenon denoting a lack of basic necessities like food, health, shelter and clothing. He argues that the poor are also exploited and lack the power to make decisions on matters that intimately affect their welfare.

It is also fundamental to understand that the mechanisms of poverty are at a local level but also interlink in complex ways with national and international factors. Such factors may include government policies, international commodity prices, debts, unequal trading practices and conditional 'aid.' Geographical and climatic considerations also play an important role, and ultimately, it is the connections between these macro-elements and micro-circumstances of particular communities that must be understood for poverty alleviation strategies to be successful.

The overriding issue is that to work effectively with the poor, government, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders need to have a thorough understanding of the causes of poverty. Special focus should be directed towards how the poor themselves perceive poverty, and what solutions they envisage.

There is no doubt that a limited understanding of poverty can strip dignity and self respect from those who have little else.

A brief historical and situational analysis of the above-raised issues will thus help to unravel some of the main causes of poverty in Zimbabwe.

Historical and Situational Analysis of Poverty in Zimbabwe

From the author's perspective, the root causes of poverty in Zimbabwe can largely be attributed to the disintegration of the traditional African society following the inception of colonialism. It cannot be disputed that casualties of poverty in traditional society were kept at a minimum because interaction between family care, community support and institutional provision was especially intricate. This was so because the ideological framework insisted that individualism was alien to the African culture, hence the extended family system served as a social safety net for the poor.

As modernisation ideals became entrenched in all aspects of life with the advent of capitalism, this had major repercussions on the family structure of the black Zimbabwean. For instance, the African population became a reservoir of cheap labour for the white-run modern sector, resulting in households becoming *de facto* headed by women (UNICEF, 1994). At Independence the new government inherited a socially, politically, economically, and technologically dualistic socio-economic system. On one hand, it was composed of a white-dominated relatively capital-intensive modern sector, including commercial farms, mines, modern manufacturing and service units. On the other hand, there existed side-by-side a largely neglected peasant sector characterised by low per capita incomes, widespread poverty and disease, and an underdeveloped infrastructure (Mandaza, 1986).

Given these disparities, the Zimbabwe Government adopted a socialist-inspired policy of 'Growth with Equity' in 1981 which set out to achieve economic growth and at the same time give people a share in this. Free health care education for all, rural development and the integration of small farmers into the market structure, and an increase in minimum wages were some of the policies which aimed to improve living standards of the poor (Balleis, 1993).

In fact, life did improve for the majority of the people due to the rapid expansion of social services in the first half of the 1980s. However, as predicted by critics of the basic needs approach, too much local expenditure on education, health, water and other related development programmes reduced savings and investments with negative effects on growth (World Bank, 1995). External factors like the debt crisis, declining terms of trade and protectionism, forced the government to abandon its

socialist rhetoric and led to the adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) which was alleged to be "homegrown" (Chidzero, 1990).

The market-based economic reforms which followed further marginalised the poor and disadvantaged sections of the population due to the adverse effects of spiralling living costs, falling social services, expenditures, unemployment and reduced income levels (Government of Zimbabwe, 1994). Here lies the central fallacy of ESAP, because it does not incorporate social planning as an integral part of the planning process (Balleis, 1993). In short, the burden has been shifted onto the poor who are now paying the costs of economic reforms through user-fees in health and education systems. The use of the term 'participation' in development by the people has now become very popular as an austerity measure by government.

Nonetheless, the poor have had to devise survival strategies in light of the hardships experienced over the years, and these include prostitution, gold-panning, selling firewood and selling vegetables or other produce in the informal sector. Children have also been forced onto the streets to supplement family incomes, in some cases, and this has given rise to the street-kid phenomenon that has plagued other African countries (Kaseke, 1993).

Also, in retrospect, the government, NGOs, church organisations and other institutions provided the worst-affected rural majority with drought relief, seeds and fertiliser. Whilst it is reasonable to suggest that these short-term intervention strategies were implemented purely on humanitarian grounds, some critics claim that political expediency was the major motivating factor since some authorities capitalised on the situation to gain popularity or to win elections (Moyo, 1995).

Whatever the case may be, the Government also introduced the Social Dimensions of Adjustment Programme in 1991 as an attempt to cushion the negative effects of ESAP on the poor. Having realised the inadequacies of this strategy, the Poverty Alleviation Action Plan (PAAP) was implemented in 1994 with the main objective of broadening the overall scope, coverage and impact of targeted social programmes (UNICEF, 1994).

It is therefore necessary at this stage to offer a brief appraisal of some of these plans or programmes which were aimed at poverty reduction and employment creation in Zimbabwe.

Attempts at Poverty Alleviation

According to the proponents of ESAP, the current increase in poverty due to economic reforms is temporary, lasting only until the benefits of economic changes 'trickle-down' to the poor (Balleis, 1993). As a consequence, two main pro-

grammes under the Social Development Fund (SDF) were commissioned to mitigate the foreseen social costs of adjustment. These were the 'Employment and Training Programme' (ETP) for retrenchees, and the 'Social Welfare Programme' (SWP) which sought to target food subsidies (food money) to the existing urban poor (Kaseke, 1993). The latter programme also aimed to exempt the identified poor from the effects of cost recovery in education and health. This was to be achieved through a strategy of exempting those households of an income threshold of Z\$400 per month (approx US\$40) or less, from paying school fees in urban schools, whilst primary education in rural schools remained freely provided. The same criteria was used to deduce eligibility for free medical treatment.

In practice, though, the SDF has encountered great problems and had reached only 4% of its target population for food money, and 20% for school fees by mid-1993 (Kaseke, 1993). The ETP had created less than 1,000 jobs in a country with a workforce of over five million people. The main reason for this poor performance in all the SDF programmes is that the system of means-testing for eligibility was designed primarily to keep as many applicants as possible from applying for assistance. As a result, the opportunity cost of applying was high compared to the levels of benefits offered (Kaseke, 1993). Moreover, the focus of the SDF programme was too narrow to meaningfully assault poverty, and coupled with bureaucratic delays and limited resources, the government had to develop a much broader approach, hence the Poverty Alleviation Action Plan, or PAAP.

The PAAP, launched in 1994, is a commendable move by government to attack poverty from a broader conceptual level through targeted social reforms and reorganisation of priorities. This strategy has a series of components, the central one being the introduction of the PAAP to civil society through a social and political mobilisation process (Government of Zimbabwe, 1994). The other components are community-based PAAP programmes, for example institutional development of targeted social programmes, informal sector development and enhancement of social policy development and monitoring. In an effort to create employment, activities such as labour-based public works programmes, and the facilitation of youth and women's self-help projects have also been incorporated into the PAAP.

The Government is in the process of carrying out an assessment of poverty in the country, building on various studies already underway by UNICEF, the World Bank and others. However I feel it is important for accurate details to be obtained concerning squatters, the homeless, mine and commercial farm workers and the rest of the population which has not yet been reached by government programmes due to difficulties in locating them. Although it is too early to predict the success or failure of the PAAP, there is need for more comprehensive, but clear-cut strategies to alleviate poverty, especially in the sphere of housing provision for the poor and unemployed.

NGOs, both local and international, have constantly been hailed for their unique capacity to reach the grassroots people, and are better equipped (financially) to complement government efforts in decentralising programmes and projects in agriculture, education and other social services. However, some of these NGOs have often been criticised for practising a 'top-down' approach in which they unilaterally design and implement or impose projects onto the poor (Osei-Hwedie, 1995). As a result, such projects or programmes have often failed or lack continuity because they will be irrelevant to the cultural roots of the particular constituency and its felt needs (Shumacher, 1974). Therefore, it is very important to strike a balance between 'felt needs,' and 'induced needs' if the work of NGOs is to epitomise true participation in Zimbabwe's socioeconomic development process. Hence, not only government and NGOs should be the major players in this process, but the private sector, churches and other such organisations must take more responsibility towards the plight of the marginalised.

In essence, vague plans with an unclear course of action have to be avoided by all means. There is also a great need to mobilise more financial resources, and set up a realistic timespan for these development plans to be successfully implemented. As experience has shown us, there are many internal and external factors that impinge on the plan implementation process, but it is best to be aware of these factors and correct errors of the past as we proceed on the rocky road towards 'Growth with Equity.'

Finally, it has become abundantly clear that it is unrealistic and overambitious to assume that the vision of an egalitarian society will be realised by the year 2000, given the fact that there have been multiple plan implementation problems during these past 15 years. As it is, health, education and housing for all by this target year is short of being mere political or planning dogma, though of course, the people's government may be wholly committed to providing better living standards for the majority. Very recently the concept of "Vision 2020" has placed these goals in a more realistic time dimension; however what lies ahead of us is a mammoth task which requires a major commitment of resources and a better organisational structure for poverty to be reduced.

Strategies for Poverty Alleviation

An Agrarian Strategy Focused on Small Farmers and Women

The main causes of inequality, poverty and malnutrition in Zimbabwe's rural areas have been identified as being a lack of sufficient credit, infrastructure and social services. Women still have less access to land and inputs, although they do most of the agricultural work, a state of affairs which has resulted in a growing

differentiation within the rural sector (Balleis, 1993). In an attempt to overcome these biases, long-term development policies which embrace all these critical aspects should be implemented by Government, and the disparity between goals and outcomes in the implementation process must be bridged.

Land Reform

In the context of re-surfacing national demands for land redistribution, resettlement and reforms more than 15 years after the attainment of majority rule, it appears that land reform has no substitute. Indeed, the land question remains the most hotly and popularly contested policy reform area, but the issue remains the prerogative of the state to adjudicate over the land rights, needs and demands of the "voiceless" rural folk and other aspirant segments of society (Moyo, 1995).

Nonetheless, without going further into this heated debate concerning the land issue, the fact is that land reform will inevitably give many people access to land as a means of production, thus reducing the influx of the landless to cities (Shumacher, 1974). Furthermore, the environmental pressure on communal lands caused by overcrowding would be eased. It should be noted here that crucial to the economic success of newly industrialised giants like South Korea and Taiwan, has in fact been land reform. Therefore, it can safely be assumed that in the case of Zimbabwe, this is the best strategy available, because not only does it fulfil the people's expectations, but it also encourages private investment in agricultural tools and equipment, as well as preservation of soil fertility (Balleis, 1993).

At the same time, worth acknowledging is the point that land in most African countries is a power-base and symbol of authority, hence it is a source of political power (Moyo, 1995). Therefore, in practice, patterns of inequality still remain intact even after an agrarian reform in countries like Kenya and Tanzania. In other words, despite claims of redistribution by the political leaders in these countries, in reality, much of the land has been redistributed to members of the extended family and friends – a situation I dare say should not be witnessed in Zimbabwe if our government is truly committed to the development of its people.

Increased Investment and Human-Capital Formation

Increased public investment should thus be devoted to developing or improving infrastructure in rural areas. For instance, good public transport systems and maintenance of rural roads is of critical importance, especially with regards to the collection of the harvests of the small-scale farmers who are the majority in rural and resettlement areas. In addition, provision of irrigation, storage and access to markets are vital for rural producers (Todaro, 1982).

An Industrialisation Strategy based on Small-Scale and Labour Intensive Producers

Small-scale farmers, especially women, need to have improved access to inputs and credit. Rural financial institutions should thus be strengthened and foreign exchange should be allocated towards vital inputs in agriculture. It is also apparent that a stronger link between the agricultural and the industrial sector would inevitably promote growth in both sectors.

The author concurs with the assertion that industries in the country must do more than simply support agriculture (Balleis, 1993). An alternative strategy therefore proposes a more integrated role for industrialisation such as creating more demand for the products of the informal sector which has expanded rapidly due, in part, to the current economic reforms. Shumacher (1974) argues that in rebuilding rural industries and creating a more competitive climate for large-scale industries, this is a practical way of creating employment for the majority in rural areas. In fact, he further states that a mix of new technologies and labour-intensive techniques could reach the two goals of employment creation and foreign exchange earnings, thus reducing the pressing problem of unemployment which has been equated to a "time bomb" by many analysts in the country (Kamidza, 1996).

An Expanded, Relevant and Efficient Development of Human Capabilities

It cannot be disputed that improved public health, basic education, vocational training and water supply are critical conditions for switching to input-intensive, small-holder agriculture and in lifting the majority above the poverty-datum line. Indeed, better education, health care, nutrition and family planning services for women have been shown to reduce infant and child mortality rates, thus simultaneously slowing down population growth and improving the health conditions of the majority. That is, investment in human capital, including important basic health care and primary education for children should continue to be viewed as the most effective means of stimulating long-term economic growth and improving general welfare (Madzokere, 1995). Subsequently, the flow of financial capital for human resources development should be prioritised and vastly increased, even though these are non-productive expenditures.

Social Safety Nets and Reforming Social Welfare

Better planned and well administered social safety nets are also required to cushion the poor from the harsh shock of adjustment. Government should not be the main player in the delivery of these services since NGOs, the private sector and other

related institutions can equally, or even better, implement such programmes. In view of these issues, government should consider cutting down on defence spending, which had an allocation of more than Z\$2 billion last year. The other danger sign which should not be ignored is that government must desist from undermining its own revenue base by successively resorting to tax increases as a way of bridging the gap between revenue and expenditure. This has its negative political costs in terms of the ruling party's 'popularity' and besides, progressive taxation is not the most effective way of redistributing resources to the poor (Kamidza, 1996; Todaro, 1982). Similarly, it has also been suggested that taxing those informal traders earning above a certain income threshold, introducing road tolls, and land levies to the commercial sector could maximise revenue collection. Consequently, those resources accrued could be shifted to cash-strapped social service ministries which are in critical need of greater resource allocation.

Since social services should be further reformed, this also implies changing the educational curriculum by expanding technical and vocational schooling in order to make education more relevant to production, the labour markets and industries (Madzokere, 1995). As alluded to earlier on, the informal sector is presently the best survival strategy adopted by the poor and unemployed in the light of our 'development crisis.' Hence, this sector must inevitably be improved, and to this effect, Dhemba (1995) makes a valid suggestion that the National Social Security Authority (NSSA)'s Pension and Other Benefits Schemes should be extended to those in the informal sector in order to provide them with social security.

Greater Administrative Decentralisation, Community Participation and Partnership

Resources and administrative responsibilities of some social services must be transferred to local authorities as decentralisation takes form, so as to bring services more in line with the 'felt needs' of the communities. It also creates the added advantage of mobilising more resources as well as fostering direct decision-making at the local level (de Graaf, 1986). However, I must hasten to add that in the past, participation has been hampered by many factors, the major criticism being that 'mass participation' is unlikely to be implemented in its real form, thus crippling the notion of democracy (Todaro, 1982). For instance, a conflict of interests between administrators and the grassroots may arise, making it very unlikely that the plight of the poor will be improved. Such situations are best avoided by trying as much as possible to adopt a 'participatory approach' in all endeavours.

At the national level, facilitation, coordination, monitoring and evaluating programme implementation by the communities concerned is bound to ensure success of this alternative strategy.

The author would therefore like to emphasise that it is only through ownership of the process of development and commitment from all levels of the society, that poverty alleviation in Zimbabwe will become more than just an illusive dream. Thus information and awareness, social mobilisation, consultation and literacy campaigns are important prerequisites for this poverty alleviation plan. As de Graaf (1986) further points out, *social mobilisation* and *capacity-building* are critical elements which ensure success in any poverty alleviation strategy.

Lastly, partnerships or collaboration with other civic society members will guarantee a broader base of all social forces that can be mobilised to tackle poverty. For example, partnerships with rural district councils, NGOs and Government, will inevitably ensure more equity, collaboration, mutuality, and general sharing of responsibilities in the process of poverty alleviation. Thus, to shift people from dependency to self-sufficiency, these strategies have to be enacted by putting words into action.

Regional and International Policies to Support this Alternative Strategy

At regional level, the objectives of the OAU's Lagos Plan of Action (1981), are an example of plausible efforts aimed at reducing mass poverty in Africa. Such efforts must be strengthened by our government actively participating in these initiatives and maintaining good relations with our neighbours like South Africa, Botswana and Mozambique, to name a few.

At an international level, radical changes in global structures are needed. These may include debt writeoffs, better terms of trade, opening of world markets, and changing the patterns and increasing the levels of aid (Balleis, 1993). I would like to suggest here that some unnecessary foreign technical assistance should be removed to create more room for local expertise.

If all these strategies are fostered with political commitment and sincerity there is a greater chance for the poor to visualise a better future and enjoy the fruits of an independent Zimbabwe. The key element, however, is for all Zimbabweans to be seriously dedicated to eradicating poverty.

Social Work Education and Practice Versus Poverty Alleviation in Zimbabwe

It should be acknowledged that the School of Social Work (Harare) is presently seeking to explicate the ground and role of social work in Third World settings in general, and Zimbabwe in particular. For example, Mupedziswa (1992) and Hall

(1990) emphasise that social work education must be flexible, innovative and adaptive to allow the curriculum to capture new and emerging issues of critical concern. Mupedziswa (1992) lists major challenges of social work education and practice towards the year 2000 as unemployment, refugees, AIDS, ecology and structural adjustment programmes, including poverty alleviation. In order to deal with these concerns, social work education should be indigenised so as to equip practitioners and students with the necessary tools (Hall, 1990).

I have also observed that to meet the exigencies of the moment, social workers in Zimbabwe must research more into 'gender and poverty' (or 'feminisation of poverty'). For instance, such research could unravel the reasons why women generally do not support other women contesting for political appointments, and this information would subsequently broaden our understanding of the dynamics of grassroots participation, especially where women are concerned. Moreover, it is my strong belief that if the number of female social work students is increased, it might give impetus to advocacy for gender-sensitive policies that will improve the situation of other women (and their husbands and children, of course!) in Zimbabwe. I am not suggesting that the School of Social Work should become a 'breeding-camp' for a feminist movement, neither am I apologising for being pro-Affirmative Action in this particular instance. The point I am merely making is that women should be empowered to be at the forefront of development efforts concerning them and national development, and this is in line with the growing realisation that they have a very critical role to play in our society.

I would also like to concur with Osei-Hwedie's (1995) suggestion that social workers must enter the debate on poverty definition and other related issues so as to influence any constructed poverty-line. In the Zimbabwean context, lecturers, practitioners and students should join the band-wagon that is involved in the ongoing 'Poverty Assessment Study Survey,' and be advocates for the voiceless as we enter the Second Phase of ESAP in Zimbabwe.

In sum, it is apparent that social workers have a crucial role to fulfil and must therefore fight for recognition and protection of the profession through a national Social Workers' Bill. This is the battle which confronts the government of Zimbabwe and its people, a battle which should ultimately be won!

Conclusion

The fundamental conclusion of this paper is that at this point in time, there is no room for piecemeal engineering of inadequate social policies and lack of transparency if we are to seriously address the inequalities or imbalances which have leaked into Zimbabwe's post-independence era. Perhaps what is really important is not what we say or intend to do, but rather what we are actually doing now and how well we do it. In essence, "...we need a development of the people, by the people, based on equity and social justice, meeting basic needs, protecting the environment, alleviating poverty and integrating all the people," (Balleis, 1993:59). Finally, social workers must rise to the occasion as the vision of an egalitarian society becomes clearer.

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