THE PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE: A FUTILE EFFORT?

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"Why have you returned home? You should have searched for any form of employment where you were. It is better to be a cleaner overseas than anything here!" These were 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.

The Zimbabwean Context

After attaining independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean economy experienced a period of growth, with key social indicators improving. However, the 1990s witnessed a turnaround of economic fortunes and the downward spiral began. The human development index (HDI), had peaked in 1985 at 0.621, only to decline to 0.496 by 2001. Life expectancy at birth which was 61 years in 1990 was estimated at 43 years for the period 200 to 2005. Some of the explanations advanced for this turnaround include recurring droughts, and the non-realization of the objectives of structural adjustment programmes of the 1990s. In the period 1991 to 1995, real GDP growth rate was about 1.5% per year, after which, the country started experiencing negative growth. Real GDP growth rate was -5.7 in 2004 (CSO 2005). Extreme poverty increased significantly during the 1990s, with an estimated 20% of households living below the Food Poverty Line (very poor) in 1995, compared to 48% in 2003 (PASS, 2003). Based on the total consumption poverty line (very poor and poor), households in poverty increased from 42% in 1995 to 63% by 2003.

Currently, the economy is characterized by ever-escalating inflation levels. At Independence, in 1980, the Zimbabwe dollar was worth about $1.50 US. Since then, rampant inflation and the depreciation of the economy have severely devalued the currency, with inflation reaching 624% in early 2004, falling back to low triple digits around 2005 before surging to a new high of 3, 713.9% in April 2007. Distortions in the pricing of key commodities and utilities, high unemployment rates, rising poverty levels, foreign exchange and commodity shortages, deterioration of basic public service provision, rising inequalities and large income disparities, characterize the economy. Inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient increased from 0.57 in 1995 to 0.64 in 2003, implying a worsening of income distribution.

Educational Reforms in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwean educationalist, Dr. Samuel Mumbengegwi outlined in his paper, "Quality Education for All: knowledge, technology and the future of higher education" some of the major reforms that the Zimbabwean education system has undergone since attaining independence in 1980. These have included both quantitative and qualitative reforms. Having its roots in a colonial legacy of a broader primary and a narrower tertiary education, the Zimbabwean education system was characterized by an unequal provision of education between the white and black communities. To address these anomalies and inequalities, the education system has undergone major reforms over the past 20 years, with the principle of education for all adopted at independence in 1980.

The first major reform was the amalgamation of the separate education systems that were present before independence. The reforms in the first decade focused on

addressing quantities, and significant increases in the number of schools and colleges were registered. In 1980, there were 5 teachers colleges, 2 polytechnic colleges, and 1 University. By 1990, teachers colleges had increased to 14, technical colleges to 8, 2 vocational training centres (VTCs) established and still 1 University[1]. These reforms led to an increase in student enrolment because of the response to the high demand for schools that was grounded in the pre-independence system.

The educational reforms from 1990 were more focused on the relevance and quality of education. New approaches to content, technologies, teaching methodologies, skills provision and decentralization of technical and teachers colleges were used to effect these reforms, including the establishment of college advisory boards. The Presidential Commission on Education and Training of 1999 recommended a wide range of educational reforms with primary focus on teacher education, the sciences, technology and skills. This gave way to the establishment of the Scientific and Industrial Research Development Centre (SIRDC). This institution had the mandate of conducting research in industry and linking it with higher education 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 recent years, there has been a persistent drive for the computerization and networking of tertiary institutions through the Educational Management Information Systems (EMIS). The country also moved towards a computer-based higher education system, promoting computer use and technology at all levels of education.

The effects of these reforms, however, have been eroded by the adverse economic climate, with registered successes being reversed and implementation of programmes challenged by lack of continuity and resources to move policy to action.

Youth Education and Employment

The manifestation of youth unemployment and school leaver problems is evident in the fact that unemployment in Zimbabwe is highest among the 15-19 and the 20-24 age groups, with the usual unemployment rate being 27 and 22% respectively. Structural unemployment[2] rate ranged from 57 to 63% in 2003 and is generally high across all age groups, but again is higher in the 15-19 and 20-24 age groups (PASS 2003).

Education is conventionally thought to bring private benefits through raising earnings in wage employment, with wages expected to be higher for more educated workers. It should equip individuals to better compete in the knowledge-based economy as it provides students with critical higher-level skills and knowledge for advanced learning and training of professionals.Studies have proved that investment in human capital leads to increased income-earning capacity, with increase in both private and social rates of return with education attained. In his study, Appleton (2001) found that in Uganda, mean wages were higher for more educated workers, and wage earnings were 30%

[1] Mumbengegwi, S. Quality education for all: knowledge, technology and the future of higher education
[2] Structural unemployment is unemployment that comes from there being an absence of demand for the workers that are available.

higher for people with complete secondary education than those with only completed primary education.

Several factors can be advanced as affecting the educational process and youth employment. These can be economic, social, political or cultural. The factors affecting educational access and attainment are varied, some of which, if addressed, also address employment problems because of the link between education and employment opportunities. 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, interventions are mutually reinforcing and should look at the two issues concurrently.

The economic environment is a major inhibiting factor to educational development and employment creation. Cuts in education and other expenditure because of negative economic growth and low investment have compromised the development of 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, Sport and Culture was just 8.94% of the National Budget, a reduction from the 19.24% in 2006. Of this budget, employment costs make up 77.45% of the Ministry's budget, with only 15.02% allocated for operations and educational development (Ministry of Finance 2006). This small portion is meant to cater for implementing projects, including building schools and infrastructure in schools and educational programmes.

With the prevailing economic hardships faced by the majority of people in Zimbabwe, a lack of resources by parents and guardians for schooling costs negatively affects the schooling of many children in Zimbabwe. Education in Zimbabwe requires payment of tuition fees at all levels; pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary. This means that a huge burden falls on parents to send their children to school. The introduction of tuition fees in state universities in 2006 resulted in a major outcry from the majority because of the increased cost burden, considering that the government is a major duty bearer in the provision of quality education and should be able to cushion the vulnerable from harsh socio-economic influences This saw a great reduction in university student enrolment in state universities, as most could no longer afford.

Have we abandoned "Education for Better Employment, Growth and Development?"

Poverty and economic hardships can either make people fight to attain increased education for a better future, or shy away from advancement in education for making quick money. The latter is disastrous to society in the long run, but is however, the path many people in Zimbabwe have been taking in recent years. Continuing with education is increasingly viewed as more money spent, with a high perceived opportunity cost of schooling, rather than an investment in human capital with expected future high rates of return. The nation has developed myopic behaviour and singular thinking. The main goal of each person leaving the educational system is to map out an exit strategy, to find

whichever employment they can in other countries. Nationally, 0.6% of the population is estimated to migrate abroad in a year. The harsh economic environment is crowding out ambitions of career development, nation building and entrepreneurship development, and cultivating a thirst to make quick money. This at most times means people no longer view education as a means to a personal, familial and national development mechanism because it does not seem to pay off. The perceived returns to higher education are becoming lower. In the 1980s and 1990s, parents encouraged their children to be educated to be able to become doctors and lawyers, etc because of the perception then, that these professions were profitable. More recently, however, the objective of many parents is to find ways and means to send their children overseas to work as soon as they finish secondary school so. Perceived rates of return to education have drastically reduced as parents and the students themselves either feel that it does not pay off, or it does not pay of quickly enough. This has had an adverse effect on the economy, as there is a huge loss of much of the productive age groups to countries like the United Kingdom, South Africa and Botswana.

The mass exodus of the population in search of greener pastures has led to shortages of qualified workers in the education sector, compromising the quality of education delivery. The resultant effect of this, coupled with the low productivity and investment levels in the country, and low growth, is decreased investment in human capital, which further undermines the quality of workforce in the country and employability of school leavers.

Education for employability

Another challenge that has its roots in the adverse economic environment that serves as a limiting factor to investment in programmes that promote the development of certain skills and techniques in schools is that of matching the appropriate skills to the right job. In most cases, people are not employed where they can best be made use of. This implies that human capital is not being used effectively and efficiently, thus with an adverse effect on output and productivity levels, ultimately undermining growth and development in the country. Zimbabwean economist, Mr. Erich Bloch attributed the increased number of unemployed university graduates to incompatibility of employee resources and market needs. It is very common to find individuals educated in a particular field working in a completely different one because of the limited availability of jobs within their area. It is however, common-place to find people remarking at the wisdom in accepting whatever job one can rather than not having a job at all!

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. The sentiments by the former Secretary General of the United Nations have been proven true by various studies. There are several factors that inhibit women from attaining higher levels of education, namely, resource constraints, early marriages, and cultural stereotypes, among others. Programmes and reforms in education that do not take

focus or seek to particularly address the different situation of boys and girls do not adequately provide quality education for boys and girls, and somewhat undermine the labour force produced.

Gender inequality in education also manifests itself in fields of study opted for by men and women at institutions of higher learning, leading them to particular careers and employment. This may be shaped by cultural and societal factors, which classify fields of study as 'male' or 'female', as well as careers as such. There is a general perception that boys are better suited for some subjects than others, for example mathematics, and science and technology. This perception is generally one that society, boys, and girls themselves hold due to socialization. Culturally, subjects in schools are often assigned by gender identity, and attitudes towards certain subjects and careers developed in the classroom, the home, and the wider societal setting influence students' participation (Mwetulundila 2001). The focus on expanding science and technology without re-orientation of these subjects to focus on both boys and girls' education does nothing to promote gender equality in education and in turn, the employment opportunities for both boys and girls.

The gap lies in adopting mechanisms that mainstream gender in education. 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 due to various reasons. 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"
A respondent in a study by Gordon (1998)

The Poverty Assessment Study Survey of 2003 showed that more males than females were in hard core main occupations such as directors, managers and company secretaries (79% male and 21% female), engineers and technicians (96% male and 4% female), law and security (94% male and 4% female), and transport with 98% male. Women dominated cross border trading (71%), life sciences professionals (57%) and agriculture (69%).

Enhancing employability and entrepreneurship through educational reform

Access to information

There should be a move to promote and develop career guidance programmes in schools so as to equip students with reliable information on possible career prospects. Such programmes should emphasize the link between higher levels of education and the private and social rated of return to education. Ensuring guidance counsellors are gender sensitive will promote girls venturing into careers that they otherwise would not because of tradition and socio-cultural norms. The Ministry of Education should provide skilled career and vocational guidance in schools to ensure that student make informed decisions on their future. An important aspect to this is facilitating the conducting of

analyses on an annual basis, of school leavers, to give information on what jobs and training they have gone on to do. This assists young people in making career decisions.

Cultivating Life Skills

The Zimbabwean curriculum is academic and exam-oriented. This produces individuals who cannot deal with the harsh challenges of the work environment. There is a need for development of a life skills based curriculum, or even teacher manuals or guides that indicate how existing subjects can be used to impart various life skills. Of importance is ensuring that in implementation of the curriculum, education officers are clear as to what life skills are. In one study, education officers equated life skills to practical subjects such as home economics, carpentry, agriculture and building that develop psychomotor skills (Dyanda and Mavuna, 2004). Investment in the quality of education and promoting post secondary skills development also equips individuals with practical and relevant skills for the labour market.

Engaging the Business Sector

There is little engagement between students and businesses or employers. Engaging the business sector in education benefits the youth, schools, and the employers. The transition from school to employment is eased by the development of students' attitudes towards work. Raised aspirations coming about from increased knowledge and prospects of a better future also lead to improved academic performance. Partnerships between schools and businesses could be formed by teachers visiting businesses and employers visiting schools, or incorporating short placements into the secondary school system. This is absent in the Zimbabwean school system, with even some degree programmes at university not including placements.

Gender Mainstreaming in education and training

Reforms should aim at strategies that afford equal opportunity to boys and girls. Increased productivity and economic growth results from targeting gender equality in education. The role of government in facilitating gender equality in education is in implementing appropriate policies and advancing the requisite resources for this cause, and to ensure that there is relevant expertise within the sector. Government should therefore provide adequate budgetary allocations to the education sector, and to prioritise allocations within the sector to provide equal access to and quality of education. When adequate resources are availed to policy and programme implementation, follow up should be made of whether the programmes are appropriate and well targeted.

Reforms in the education sector should also aim to promote non-formal education programmes and again, mainstream gender into all such programmes for empowerment of women, and equality of opportunity within the sector. Introduction of entrepreneurial development programmes at an early stage in education will equip students to think innovatively and strategically, which would shift dependence on the formal sector, and place emphasis on innovativeness and expansion of industry.

Science education reforms should promote girls in science and technology, and also to promote 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 (UNICEF 2003). It is important for both male and female teachers to receive gender training and awareness to prevent them focusing their attentions and classifying boys' and girls' subjects, leaving girls out of the science and technology areas. Misconceptions and gender stereotyping should be addressed at an early stage in the education process. Investment in education and training should also equip women to enable them to participate in more hard core occupations and mainstream economic activities.

Duty Bearers in Reforming Education in Zimbabwe

There are numerous duty bearers in the facilitation of education and employment, with different roles and levels of accountability, that is, the international community; parents, households and communities; Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs); teachers, planners and administrators; and national and local governments. Promoting education and youth employment requires integrated strategies at all levels – family, community, local and national government, and international commitment. The need for the involvement across society in promoting education stems from the interdependence between attainment of education and development outcomes. Though reforms in the education sector are mainly effected by government, all stakeholders have a role to play. Parents need to create an enabling environment in the home for their children to access school and to participate fully in schooling activities, and to project positive expectations of children's achievements, and to encourage them to attain higher levels of education. The government has the responsibility of providing adequate budgetary allocations to the education sector, and to prioritise allocations within the sector to provide equal access to education and to support educational programmes running in the Ministry. The Ministry of Information and Publicity should provide information to the public on the merits of education, and information on available support programmes e.g. scholarships that may benefit them.

Conclusion

Because of the harsh economic environment, it is not surprising that people would much rather one takes any job available, even when such is not suited to their skills and expertise, as long as they participate in the labour market. This is detrimental to the economy, and promotes a cycle difficult to break, of continued poverty and unemployment. In the case of Zimbabwe, people not only accept unsuitable jobs within the country, but are often migrating to work overseas in any employment they can get, causing a lot of brain drain and leaving the country with little skilled manpower to create employment, promote productivity and build up the nation. The question is, "Do we lose hope in education and flee?" What is required is to come up with strategies that reduce poverty and promote economic growth in order to promote employment creation, together with those that address the critical issues in accessing education and completion, accessing higher education, and life skills development. It is critical that whatever interventions are taken to reform the educational system, a critical analysis be done of the situation of children at each level, and how the different groups (e.g. boys and girls, and the disabled) respond to any proposed interventions.

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