



Civil society calls for public education on new Constitution



'Poverty wears the face of rural women'

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SOME civil society organizations have started distributing hard copies of the new Constitution of Zimbabwe and raising awareness on its contents whilst calling on government to play its part in promoting citizens' knowledge of the document.

Zimbabwe adopted a new Constitution which came into effect upon President Robert Mugabe's inauguration for a seventh term in August – the Charter obligates the State to promote its teaching to citizens.

Section 7 of the new Constitution reads: *"The State must promote public awareness of this Constitution, in particular by – (a) translating it into all officially recognized languages and disseminating it as widely as possible;*

"(b) requiring this Constitution to be taught in schools and as part of the curricula for the training of members of the security services; the Civil Service and members and employees of public institutions;

"...(c) encouraging all persons and organisations, including civic organisations to disseminate awareness and knowledge of this Constitution throughout society."

Thabani Nyoni, the spokesperson of Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition (CiZC) and director of Bulawayo Agenda (BA), said the

role of government was not to single-handedly teach people about the document, but included the removing hindrances for other players to do civic education.

"Government must identify key competencies within our country," Nyoni said, "and facilitate that those with capacity like civil society conduct civic education on the constitution with support from government.

"This includes removal of restrictions such as POSA, AIPPA and ending hate language on certain entities."

Civil society organisations that are doing civic education and distributing the Constitution said their efforts were being welcomed by citizens and added that the awareness campaign that was done before the referendum in March had left a knowledge gap due to its ineffectiveness.

CiZC recently distributed more than 1000 copies of the document to its members and 120 copies at an outreach in Buhera in October.

Another civil society organisation, Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA) distributed more than 500 copies of the document in high-density suburbs in the capital city.

Youth Agenda Trust (YAT) distributed about 500 copies at six outreaches in Redcliff, Gokwe, Silobela, Masvingo Urban, Zaka Central and Zaka North since early September.

Lawrence Mashungu, the programs officer of YAT said the knowledge gap among the communities was being manipulated, resulting in misinformation especially by headmen in Zaka, in the southern province of Masvingo, who are said to be in possession of copies of the Constitution, but give villagers copies with the sections on Bill of Rights and the powers of the traditional leaders either “clipped” or removed.

“There is a serious knowledge gap around the new Constitution,” Mashungu said. “The challenge is being exacerbated by the fact that ZBC has not been promoting awareness on the new Constitution. We know knowledge is power.

“The government must take centre stage, but what we see is a negative role where the government is not willing to allow people to have knowledge of the document.”



Rashid Mahiya

Heal Zimbabwe Trust Director Rashid Mahiya, whose organisation has been distributing the constitution, said there was need for a comprehensive government program to make the document and its spirit something that dwells among the communities.

“From a government perspective, there is need for a government program that seeks to sensitize people to know their constitution,” Mahiya said. “There are new things, new commissions even for things such as national healing and people need to know that.”

Apart from organisations that have already started work, more organisations hope to assist in raising awareness on the

new Constitution by next month, and these include Youth Initiatives for Democracy in Zimbabwe (YIDEZ) and Youth Alliance for Democracy Trust (YAD).

YAD Director Tichaona Masiyambiri said apart from awareness campaigns the document must be put in various languages that make it easier for people to understand its contents by themselves.

“The Constitution also needs to be put in vernacular,” Masiyambiri said, adding that: “Without new laws that conform to it, how do you safeguard the new Constitution? It is the role of parliament to ensure all laws including POSA and AIPPA are revised.”

‘Poverty wears the face of rural women’

WOMEN activists have urged the government to continue looking into the plight of rural women, speaking on the eve of the International Day of Rural Women which was commemorated on Tuesday, October 15, they argued poverty wears the face of rural women.

Glannis Changachirere, whose organisation Institute for Young Women Development (IYWD) works with rural women in Masvingo Province, said that although women in general have peculiar challenges, these were more defined among rural women.

“Poverty wears the face of women, especially rural women,” Changachirere said. “Women in those areas lack access to information either because they can not afford radios, televisions and newspapers, or because the transmission is not good and newspapers follow highways.

"There is also the real issue that even if newspapers reach them they would opt to use the one dollar to buy relish."

Changachirere said violence against women either of the domestic or political type was rife in the remote areas and it went unreported, as well as girls being married off at a tender age because the parents wanted "to have economic benefits" such as bride price at the expense of the girls' education.

Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition (CiZC) Vice-chairperson Grace Chirenje said the government had moved a stride forward in terms of policy frameworks, although these needed to be strengthened by action.



Rural women cooking by the fire

"The government has come up with a lot of policies to address the challenges," Chirenje said, "but some of these policies have not translated into tangible benefits.

"For instance, although there are efforts to increase women representation in politics, representation of rural women remains very low.

"The economy is not doing well so the burden of labour in rural areas falls on women.

"However, there is a degree of consciousness that is growing on the cultural issues that affect women."

The United Nations (UN) office in Zimbabwe said one of the challenges affecting women in rural areas was a high incidence of maternity mortality. The organisation said *"home births are three times more common in rural areas compared to urban areas."* Zimbabwe has one of the highest maternity mortality in the region pegged at 960 deaths per 100 000 live births.

A female medical practitioner and health activist, Dr Rutendo Bonde of the Zimbabwe Doctors for Human Rights (ZADHR), said the health nightmare for rural women that contributes to high maternal mortality was due to inadequacy of infrastructure and poor access to the facilities.

"Most of the peripheral centres are not manned by experienced health personnel," Bonde said. "There is also shortage of midwives as these are concentrated in urban areas and central hospitals."

The Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition is a broad based civil society network of over 72 active members comprising churches, women's groups, social movements, residents associations, labour unions, human rights lawyers, and health professionals. It was formed in August of 2001 to focus on democracy, human rights, good governance and sustainable development issues – working locally, regionally and internationally.