GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL WELFARE: The Experience of Zimbabwe in achieving the MDGs

Presentation made

by

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Introduction

The presentation is going to focus on social welfare as it relates to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by Zimbabwe.

The emphasis of social welfare is the protection of people against the vulnerability induced by poverty. The MDGs are the global compact that provides a roadmap for all nations that acceded to them for the reduction of poverty. However, given the economic meltdown happening in Zimbabwe at the moment, achieving the MDGs targets by 2015 present a number of challenges. To that end, I argue that addressing people’s welfare needs can not be confined to a time period. It should be an on-going focus for every democratic government.

Goal 1; Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

There are two perspectives to the definitions of poverty. The monetary perspective which defines poverty as falling below a certain income threshold. The UN defines all people who live below 1 US$ per day as being poor. Then there is the Human development perspective which defines poverty as being deprived of those opportunities and choices that are essential for a long, healthy life, freedom, dignity and decent standard of living.

The majority of the African people, Zimbabweans in particular are poor by both definitions. The 1US$ per day indicator is not appropriate in many ways. In Zimbabwe currently 1US$ translates to Z$100,000 at the official market. A loaf of bread costs between Z$100,000 and Z$200,000. This therefore begs for going beyond the US1 dollar per day and focus on the quality of life offered by the dollar to the different individuals.

The human development perspective is also challenged in many ways. More than 80% of Zimbabweans live below the Poverty Datum Line making the achievement this goal by 2015 is unrealizable.

More than 70% of the population resides in rural areas with poor infrastructure and social services provision.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Zimbabwe has one of the highest literacy rates in Africa. While this is very commendable and the enrolment levels are high, these can not be used as a proxy for high completion rates. The reality on the ground is that the completion rates drop especially at high school. This situation is compounded by a number of challenges. The cost of education has gone beyond the reach of many. With the introduction of Structural Adjustment
Goal 6: Combat HIV and AIDS, Malaria and other diseases

Southern Africa and Zimbabwe in particular is at the epicenter of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Though the HIV and AIDS prevalence rate for Zimbabwe is reported to have dropped from 33% to 23%, on the ground one is glared in the face by decimations of families, increase in the number of orphans and child-headed households as a result of HIV and AIDS related deaths. The country is challenged by both the unavailability and unaffordability of the Anti-Retro-Viral drugs. The country’s Health Service Delivery
system is crippled in terms of being able to meet the health services demands of the population by both lack of drugs and human capacity due to brain drain. While Zimbabwe is one of the few countries that have instituted an AIDS levy, the management of the funds is poor deeming the levy a double burden to the tax payers. The funds hardly reach the intended beneficiaries as a result tax payers contribute to the fund but still look after their HIV infected and affected relatives.

**Goal 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability**

There seems to be a symbiotic relationship between poverty and environmental sustainability. The higher the poverty levels the bigger the threat to the environment as people seek to make a living by exploiting the resources at their disposal. In most cases this is done with very little regard for sustainability.

Zimbabwe has just gone through a process of land redistribution. The redistribution has been undertaken as an effort to redress the historical colonial imbalances that existed whereby 1/3 of the white population owned ¾ of the fertile land, pushing the black majority to the dry, unproductive lands. Unfortunately, despite the noble idea with the redistribution, the exercise has brought about a number of challenges. The new resettled families embarked on indiscriminate cutting down of trees and burning of grass as they cleared their pieces of land for agriculture. This had grave consequences for environmental sustainability. The land redistribution exercise has also resulted in wide condemnation mostly by the international community and subsequent isolation of the country. It is the ordinary people who mostly feel the negative impact of the isolation of Zimbabwe by the international community and as the economy goes on a free fall.

**Conclusion**

At the heart of the Millennium Development Goals is the understanding that fighting poverty is a collective undertaking and that all countries have a stake in its results. In pushing forth this undertaking, countries must be put the welfare of the ordinary people at the center and the decisions they make political or otherwise, must be informed by the need to protect the plight of the ordinary people. Zimbabwean people, more now than ever before, need all the support they can get from neighbours and the international community to address the plethora of challenges that confront them in terms of meeting their welfare needs.