

# The Commonwealth and the state of education in Zimbabwe

**Senator David Coltart**

Since the London Declaration of the Commonwealth of Nations in 1949, the world has experienced environmental, fiscal, food and fuel crises alongside extraordinary advances in science, technology and medicine. Such challenges make it abundantly clear that securing human welfare and our global commons depends on a complex network of inter-dependent relationships, in which each individual nation is critical to the success of the collective. However, these relationships, so important to all of us, are far from stable. For that reason, nation states are at a crossroads. Decisions have to be made about how to protect the rights of all citizens and serve their interests and aspirations.

In 1991, Zimbabwe hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting where member countries reaffirmed their relationship based on shared values of democracy, freedom, peace, the rule of law and opportunity for all. Since then, however, many individual states have remained threatened by the fragility of institutions and governance. The human cost of this fragility has been catastrophic, as reflected in the decline of a number of social indicators.

Since 2000, Zimbabwe has had to confront multiple and complex challenges that have been partly due to the country's social and political instability. Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth following flawed elections in March 2002, and its subsequent withdrawal in December 2003, marked the governance crisis facing the country. Reaching a peak in 2008, the deepening political polarisation and a precipitous economic decline induced shocks and pressures that left many sectors on the verge of collapse – among them the education and health sectors. Government capacity at all levels was severely eroded to a point of near-paralysis.

Over the last two decades, Zimbabwe's health system, which was referred to as the leading example in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, has deteriorated at an alarming rate. Life expectancy at birth has fallen dramatically, while infant, child and maternal mortality rates have risen. In 2008, the country experienced a humanitarian crisis, which was as much a symptom of severe economic deterioration and inadequate public expenditure on public goods and services as it was a consequence of dilapidated physical infrastructure.

Evidence on the ground suggests that the country's education system is now also facing a crisis – one of the most serious in its history. Government, with support from development partners and other key stakeholders, invested heavily in the sector over the two and a half decades following independence in 1980. By 1990, the country had met the original Education for All (EFA) target of universal primary access, and was able to report among the highest adult literacy rates in Africa well into the last decade. Primary schools and their pupil numbers increased from 2,410 and 820,266 in 1979 to 5,560 and 2,445,516 in 2006 respectively. The country attained a near-universal access to basic education while

simultaneously maintaining high levels of quality and equity. And yet, today, the education system is in crisis.

## Quality and capacity

The capacity of government to deliver quality education to all Zimbabweans has been seriously compromised. A significant number of schools are now unsafe and structurally unsound, and there is a severe shortage of toilet facilities, which poses a grave health risk. In 2008, a cholera outbreak claimed more than 1,100 lives throughout Zimbabwe.

National pass rates have declined significantly since 2006. Poor examination results suggest that the combined shortage of infrastructure, high pupil ratios, and lack of teaching and learning materials have had an adverse effect on the quality of learning. Textbook supplies, which had been largely financed by parents from levies and their own household income, have dropped to a record low. UNICEF estimates that there are 15 children for each textbook in the core subjects in primary schools, while a recent survey showed that at least 12 per cent of secondary schools had no maths textbooks at all in 2009.

Decreasing government expenditure on education has forced schools to increasingly rely on tuition fees and levies. The consequent rise in fees and levies has been a serious obstacle to educational access and completion for many school children. Lack of resources disproportionately affects the marginalised, especially girls. The use of student levies and fees to supplement salaries and retain teachers has exacerbated inequalities between students who can afford higher supplements and those from poor socio-economic backgrounds. In some cases, this has also strained teacher-parent relations and weakened the general social standing of teachers, who now have to depend on stipends from parents. Additionally, evidence suggests that there are persistent and growing inter-provincial and rural/urban disparities in service delivery.

About 10 to 15 per cent of the primary school-age population is out of school and the majority of this demographic consists of orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs). A recent poverty study showed that at least 25 per cent of school-age children come from indigent households that are unable to pay for basic services. The system currently accommodates at least 976,000 OVCs, not all of whom benefit from the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM)<sup>1</sup> programme and other interventions. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture can no longer provide even the most basic services for the more than 150,000 children with special needs currently in the system, nor for the many more not within the system.

## Human resources

The Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture's human resource situation is particularly serious. The number of qualified teachers has decreased, while absenteeism and resignations have increased, fuelled in part by the abysmally low level of remuneration and deteriorating working conditions in many schools. Some qualified teachers have left Zimbabwe in search of economic opportunities in neighbouring countries – especially South Africa and Botswana – as well as the UK, where many are working in non-teaching jobs. As a result, today, almost 25 per cent of all primary level teachers are unqualified and temporary compared to the 1990s when almost all teachers in Zimbabwe were qualified. The declining performance standards and increasing disparities are eventually likely to manifest themselves in a collapse in the literacy levels.

## Positive change ahead

The problems experienced in the education sector have been as much a product of the fragility of local institutions and governance as of the breakdown in the relationships between local and international partners. However, the signing of the Global Political Agreement (GPA) in September 2008 and subsequent formation of the Inclusive Government in February 2009 raised prospects for positive changes in Zimbabwe's political and socio-economic fortunes, creating opportunities to rebuild, improve and expand the country's education system.

Furthermore, the launch of the Short-Term Emergency and Recovery Programme in March 2009 paved the way for the country's rehabilitation, and the revival of the education system was placed as one of the key priorities during this transitional period. Government also established co-ordination mechanisms for the development partners and the Education Transition Fund (ETF), which provides a vehicle for external investors in education to align with the strategic vision of the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture. The ETF facilitated the realisation of government objectives to provide textbooks to all primary and secondary schools to ensure a 1:1 pupil to textbook ratio in at least the core curriculum subjects. Schools received stationery supplies and steel cabinets, and textbooks were in full production for distribution.

With a focus on halting the deterioration in education and initiating the beginning of a recovery process, the ministry has set out the following strategic objectives for the period 2011 to 2015.

- **Restore access and revitalise quality in primary and secondary schools.** Government hopes to restore the professional status of teachers and improve their conditions of service. In order to re-establish minimum conditions of learning, government will rehabilitate schools that are structurally unsafe, install adequate toilets in every school, reduce congestion in facilities, and provide access to equipment, furniture and learning materials. The quality of learning will be improved through a curriculum renewal process and strengthening learning assessment.
- **Reinvigorate school and system governance and management.** The key priority at system level is strengthening information management; at district level, restoring the capacity of the ministry to supervise the system; and at school level, strengthening supervision and management. In addition, the

ministry seeks to clarify and improve the powers of School Development Committees and the financing of schools.

- **Target resources to the excluded.** Government seeks to refine, refocus and refinance the BEAM programme to enhance better coverage and reach out to the excluded, including OVCs, out-of-school children, children with special needs and talented but disadvantaged children. Special needs education, in the interest of inclusive education, requires revitalisation, with talented disadvantaged learners accessing high quality schools. In addition, government is working to create a policy to identify and nurture talented disadvantaged children to ensure that their unique academic, athletic and artistic talents are not lost to the nation.

## Stakeholders and relationships

The positive steps thus far made by Zimbabwe in its efforts to rebuild key sectors are a result of relationships at both local and international levels. Locally, the formation of the inclusive government has provided a platform for political actors and other stakeholders to begin the national rebuilding process. Internationally, development partners, multilateral institutions, civil society organisations and governments have played an important role in Zimbabwe's transition. Building on the strength of these relationships will be critical for the new phase of Zimbabwe's transition and the rebuilding of the education sector.

In the context of the ongoing positive developments, the role of the Commonwealth may be even more important given the challenges faced by many countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia to achieve universal primary education by 2015. Although Zimbabwe is not currently a member of the Commonwealth, the shared responsibility of the people of Zimbabwe and other member states to protect and promote human rights, democracy, the rule of law, good governance, equality for women, sustainable development and universal access to education justifies collaboration and collective action. For that reason, the Commonwealth should engage Zimbabwe to help address challenges and opportunities on the ground. The Commonwealth must work with multiple stakeholders committed to education and continue to provide the platform for member states to live up to the shared values and principles outlined in the declaration adopted by Commonwealth leaders in 1991 in Harare.

### Endnote

- 1 The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) is a government initiative established to provide financial support to cover tuition fees and levies for OVCs in the country. With hyperinflation, the programme ceased in part because no resources were available. BEAM was revived in 2009 by a new funding partnership between the government, UNICEF and the international donor community to help support primary education.

**David Coltart** was appointed Minister of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture for Zimbabwe in 2009. He is also Senator for the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Khumalo Senatorial Constituency; senior partner with the legal practitioners Webb Low and Barry, Bulawayo; board member of the Bulawayo Legal Projects Centre; and Chairman of the Legal Committee of the Movement for Democratic Change.