

Zambia: poverty and backwardness made in London and Washington

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No amount of statistics relating to poverty in Africa prepares the visitor for the sensuous impact of the appalling social conditions to be found in Zambia, in Southern Africa. Home to 10 million people, some of the poorest on earth, Zambia ranks as 153rd out of 176 countries in terms of poverty.

Primitiveness and backwardness are reflected in every aspect of life, from housing, health care, education and transport to access to basic amenities that are commonplace in the West. Four out of five people live below the World Bank's definition of poverty, that is, on less than \$1 a day. Put concretely, this means that most people live on one meal day. Only 30 percent of people have access to electricity. There are only 40,000 landlines and 70,000 mobile phones.

The roads just a stone's throw from the international airport in Lusaka, Zambia's capital city, are unsurfaced and potholed on the way into the city. You see people carrying large plastic containers—fetching water. Lusaka has neither old style colonial buildings nor the glitz of a modern city. A few office blocks stand alongside shacks, bustling street markets and workshops. Vendors brave the traffic to sell their wares on the busy roads. There are old blue and white minibuses everywhere overflowing with passengers.

A tiny handful of wealthy people live behind high walls and gates that are permanently guarded. Those fortunate enough to have a professional or white-collar job in the “formal” sector earn around \$200 a month and live on rundown estates. The overwhelming majority live in squalid shacks, without water, sanitation or electricity. There is no light, no heat during the cold winter evenings or cooling system during the long hot summers.

Healthcare, once free, is now unaffordable for most people—courtesy of the World Bank and IMF's Structural Adjustment Programme. Since 1993-94, not only must people contribute in the form of an insurance scheme, but treatment in hospital requires an upfront payment before a patient can be admitted. Since the hospitals, even Lusaka's main University Teaching Hospital (UTH), have no money for equipment, patients must take in surgical gloves, syringes and anything else the doctor needs.

UTH was the quietest hospital I have ever seen. In most of the wards, there were few patients. My friend, a junior hospital doctor, came home from work early every day: there was not a lot to do.

She told me that two years ago, the doctors went on strike—not for more pay but because they lacked the basic equipment to perform surgery and carry out treatments. Even wheelchairs to move patients around were not available. The situation is no better today. You see patients shuffling and hauling themselves along the floor. Clinical staff are leaving the country to seek work in Botswana, South Africa and Europe.

Only the under five's wards for children were full—with children suffering from malnutrition and starvation. Child mortality rates at 197:1000 are even higher than the infant mortality rates of 109:1000. They are among the worst in sub-Saharan Africa. The main causes of death

are infectious diseases that are entirely preventable or, apart from HIV/AIDS, easily treatable. Children's nutritional status has deteriorated in the last 10 years. Forty-two percent of children under five are stunted or chronically malnourished, 18 percent are severely stunted and up to 50 percent suffer from micro-nutrient deficiencies. Stunting gets worse with age and poor access to clean water and sanitation compounds the problem.

With few medical staff, mothers have to stay in the hospital to feed and nurse their children. This in turn means that relatives have to travel in from the townships with food and clothing. Not surprisingly, within a few days, the mothers are begging to be allowed to go home.

It was just too harrowing for me to continue on to the AIDS ward.

AIDS has had a devastating impact on the country. At least 20 percent of people are believed to be HIV positive, but in towns like Kapiri Mposhi, a major international railway junction with a migrant population, the rate is more than double the national average. Life expectancy has fallen to 45. Without AIDS, it would have risen to 66 by 2010. Instead, it will fall to 33 or lower, similar to Europe in the Middle Ages. People in the prime of life are being wiped out by the disease.

One in five mothers are HIV-positive. A staggering half a million children have lost both parents to AIDS. The number of children orphaned by AIDS is expected to rise to one million by 2010. Zambia has the highest proportion of orphans in Southern Africa. At least one third and soon one half of all children (half of the 10 million population are under 15) will have lost a parent. Three quarters of Zambian families are caring for at least one orphan. Under conditions where most of the people do not have enough to live on, many children go uncared for and live on the streets. A few months ago, the authorities rounded up the street children but the orphanages, run by the churches and NGOs, were unable to cope and many were soon living out on the streets again.

The Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are some of the biggest employers in Zambia. I was surprised to see the international aid agency Oxfam occupying the ground floor of a multi-story office block in Kitwe, alongside Barclays Bank and PriceWaterhouseCoopers, the international accountants.

The state of education is no better than health. Children walk miles every day to and from school. That is, if they go to school at all. Under “cost sharing” arrangements introduced in the 1980s, government funding of education fell and parents must contribute towards a general education fund. They also have to pay desk fees, the cost of paper, pencils, school uniforms, shoes and bags. Not surprisingly, only 52 percent of Zambian children start school at seven years of age, with many starting much later. Huge numbers of children of primary school age are not going to school. Even so, it is quite normal for teachers to have 40 children in class and for classrooms to be overcrowded.

The majority of 13- to 15-year-old children only complete primary school education. Their lack of education means that the only avenue left open to them is to wander the streets; many become pick pockets and petty criminals.

The picture in secondary schools is even bleaker. Teacher/student ratios are worse. Many children drop out or are forced to repeat a year due to poor tuition. Fewer girls attend, and even fewer complete their secondary education.

There are two universities in Zambia, in Lusaka and Kitwe in the Copperbelt, with a combined student population of about 6,000. The impoverishment of education for even the most fortunate social layer may be judged by just this one example. I went to the bookstore at both universities in the hope of finding books on Zambia's history, politics, and economic and social development. But the entire bookstore consisted of just a few shelves, with out of date and poorly produced books. At Lusaka, the bookstore's main stock consisted of World Bank publications and none of these were on Zambia. All I could find on Zambian politics were compilations of the speeches of former President Chiluba, who is now the subject of corruption charges.

About half of Zambia's population works on the land. The vast majority grow maize, vegetables and other crops in tiny plots. There is little public investment in electricity, irrigation or rural transport. The co-operative purchasing and marketing boards as well as some subsidies and a regulated market once provided the predominantly small and subsistence farmers with a lifeline. Deregulation and liberalisation of agriculture and the removal of subsidies after 1992 swept that away. Costs rose and farmers simply could not market their produce. Total acreage under production fell dramatically. That is why the drought in Zambia is having such a catastrophic impact today. The drought 10 years ago that was no worse than the present one was by contrast far more manageable.

Cash crops such as roses and other flowers, fruit, vegetables, herbs and spices grown for European supermarkets are only possible for capital intensive commercial farmers close to urban centres and the limited transport network.

Journeys by car from Lusaka to the other main cities, Kitwe in the north and Livingstone near the truly magnificent Victoria Falls were boneshakers. Large stretches of roads have cavernous potholes so drivers are continually swerving to avoid them. Most truck drivers drive at night to avoid the searing heat that is not only uncomfortable but also destroys tyres. With no street lighting, accident rates are high. The *Lonely Planet* guide book said that if you had never driven in Africa before, Zambia was not the place to start.

I had the opportunity to see the conditions in which the people in various sections of Zambia must live. Just outside Lusaka's most desirable residential area are shacks that are home to many Zambians. Women sit all day by the roadside breaking stones and rocks with a hammer to sell as building materials. Just out of the city people live in mud huts.

In the countryside, miles from any town, impoverished families stand by the roadside trying to sell charcoal, yams and vegetables to the few passing cars. Tiny children sit passively by their parents, too weak and languid to play or run around, as cars flash past them. When we stopped to buy onions and yams at one stall, I asked if I could take a photo. They didn't refuse but said simply, "Now we will be shown as poor people."

Some of the largest and most conspicuous buildings are police stations. The police have a dreadful reputation. Human rights abuses, arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention and long delays before trial are widespread.

Everyone I spoke to said it wasn't always like this. Zambia was once sub-Saharan Africa's second richest country. It has an abundance of copper, cobalt and other minerals. It has precious and semi-precious stones. Most of the land is fertile and it has plenty of water. Yet the average annual per capita income is now about \$380, having fallen more than 60 percent since 1975.

At independence in 1963, copper production accounted for 41 percent of GDP, 71 percent of government revenue and 93 percent of foreign earnings. After independence, copper enjoyed a decade long boom and the

industry was nationalised. But the end of the post-war boom, the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973-74 and the late 1990s recession raised costs and lowered prices, forcing Zambia into the clutches of the International Monetary Fund and ever increasing debt.

By 1998 per capita copper earnings were less than five percent of those in 1970 in real terms. Mining's share of exports fell from 90 percent in 1992 to 67 percent in 1998 due to the collapse in commodity prices on the world's markets. The catastrophic devaluation of Zambia's currency, the Kwacha, engineered by multinational corporations and international financial institutions exasperated the problems.

The scale of the hardship and suffering is illustrated by the fact that when Zambia gained independence from Britain in 1963, the Kwacha was worth one pound. Now it takes 6,600 Kwacha to buy one pound.

Along with IMF loans granted in 1991-92 when President Chiluba came to power came privatisation and so called liberalisation. Britain's Department for International Development under Clare Short withheld aid and loans pending privatisation of the mines.

In the last two to three years, the copper mines have been broken up and sold off to eight different international consortia. "Sold", however, is a misnomer—most of the consortia received the benefit of "deferred" terms and various tax breaks and sweeteners so that they never handed over a penny. Anglo-American, the successor company to Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company that ran Southern Africa for decades until the 1920s took over Konkola, the largest deep copper mine in the world. Early this year, Anglo-American announced that they were pulling out of Konkola—there simply wasn't enough money in it for them. Given that Anglo-American also bought the open cast mines in Chile and Peru, where costs are lower, it is more than likely that they "bought" Konkola to close down the competition.

As poor as conditions are today, there is no prospect for any improvement. On the contrary, the so-called debt relief schemes organised under the aegis of the World Bank's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) programme are tied to more of the same policies that have already had such devastating results. They serve only to ensure that the international banks will continue to extract from the poor people of Zambia and other poor countries whatever wealth they are able to produce and redistribute it to the world's richest people and countries. Capitalism in the 21st century only offers to the workers and peasants of Zambia truly horrendous social conditions.



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