

The Response from the Grassroots: Self-reliance in Zambian Education

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Introduction

It has been argued that the current economic crisis in Africa has its positive as well as its negative effects. Zambia has been one of the worst hit countries. With a sharp drop in the real value of GDP, a decline in the local currency to a fraction of its previous value, a negative per capita growth rate and a massive foreign debt of 5 bn USD (approximately 750 USD per capita), the country has experienced severe social and economic problems.

This has had a very disruptive impact on the education system, in particular because limited resources had to be stretched more thinly over ever-increasing numbers of pupils and students. The consequences of this have threatened the very existence of the formal education system as we know it.

Yet the crisis has also mobilised a remarkable amount of energy among parents, administrators and teachers, that had laid dormant through the years of government abundance. Around the country schools and communities have adopted a much greater responsibility for education in terms of quantitative expansion as well as the preservation of quality.

Below we shall consider various responses from the 'grassroots', i.e. the schools and the community, to the economic crisis as it affects education. The emphasis will be on aspects of the quality of education in primary schools. This article will show how the crisis has contributed to the actual implementation of the educational reform proclaimed in 1977. Attention will be given to the need for an adequate government response to deal with the new realities in education and to give support to local initiatives.

The Economic Crisis and the Financing of Education

According to Kelly (1988), in Zambia the amount of real resources available for public use has not varied substantially since 1973. In education, there has been some decrease in real resources. The proportion of public funds spent on education dropped in 1986 to eight per cent, which is about four per cent below the average for the whole period 1970-85. The decline is applicable to both recurrent and capital spending. Nevertheless, it is also argued that:

notwithstanding the financial difficulties that became so prominent after 1975, neither the social services segment as a whole, nor the education sector as an element of this segment, suffered the kind of relative reduction in resources that some analysts foresaw as virtually inevitable

[Kelly 1988:16]

Despite this commitment to social services, public spending on education has currently reached an all-time low. In real terms in 1985 a smaller recurrent budget (K42.7 mn - K1 = USD 0.12) had to cater for twice the number of students and teachers (1.5 mn and 33,000 respectively) as in 1970, thus halving the unit expenditure [Kelly 1988:17].

Primary and secondary education suffered relatively more than university education, their share of recurrent funds falling from 68.9 per cent in 1970-75 to 61.1 per cent in 1985-86. At the primary level the decline in resources had the consequence that teachers' salaries, which used to account for some 78 per cent of spending, now absorb nearly all the money that is left in the budget (96.5 per cent in 1986). The main consequence of this has been a further decrease in the allocation for teaching materials, so much so that since 1986 hardly any provision has been made. Secondary education escaped the same fate mainly because over the years relatively expensive expatriates were replaced by cheaper indigenous staff [Kelly 1988:24-5].

Capital spending on primary schools has fallen sharply since 1983. In 1985 its share of total expenditure on education was down to 3.5 per cent as against 53.6 per cent for secondary education. It is alleged that some public investment in primary education has been maintained because of the distribution of funds through the provincial development budgets [Kelly 1988:20].

In the face of these changes in the availability of public finances to education, government policy has continued to emphasise the need for further expansion of the system, particularly at primary and junior secondary level.

The aim of providing a basic education for all of nine years duration, adopted as part of the Educational Reforms (1977) has remained a central political concern. In order to accomplish this the government sought to make savings on current expenditure as well

as to generate additional funds. The former was achieved by cutting down on materials and dividing the amount for salaries among a larger number of teachers (ensuring a very drastic reduction in take-home pay in the process). The latter concentrated on soliciting more funds from abroad and mounting a large-scale mobilisation of private funds within the country, especially in the form of parental payments.

At present in Zambia, all educational materials that reach primary schools are funded, in one way or another, by donor agencies. They include not only textbooks, but also exercise books, all of which are locally produced but with foreign aid. Also, school furniture is financed exclusively by donors, the main source being World Bank imports and Swedish financed central production [Johnston *et al.*, 1987:61]. Donors fund a secondary school rehabilitation and preventive maintenance programme, as well as a large part of all in-service training for teachers and administrators. Thus, although officially the government recurrent budget is financed from own resources, in practice large additional inputs come from donor assistance, all of which — regardless of their nature — are put under the capital budget. While in 1980 25.2 per cent of this budget was raised through development aid, in 1986 this percentage had increased to almost 75 [Kelly *et al.*, 1986].

Concerning locally generated funds, it should be noted that the private sector in Zambian education is very small. Although enrolments in this sector at primary and secondary levels are increasing their percentage share of the total, enrolments at these levels were 0.6 and 6.3 respectively in 1965 [Kelly 1988]. Of greater importance has been the response by the parents and community at large to a government call for community contribution to education. This situation, whereby parents and non-parents are directly or indirectly responsible for the erection of school buildings is the most genuine community-oriented type of financing [cf Bray with Lillis 1988] and has become common in Zambia.

Over the years parents have accepted a greater financial responsibility for the education of their children. Whereas originally they took care only of indirect expenses, such as uniforms and transport, they now share much more in the direct costs of consumables such as exercise books, learning materials and examination fees, and contribute towards the repair and maintenance of equipment through school funds. A study has calculated that in 1985 the amount paid at the primary level for such recurrent costs for each child was approximately 15 per cent of the per capita national income [Kelly *et al.*, 1986] This constitutes a considerable drain on parental resources, especially for urban and rural subsistence workers. The percentage should be compared with the unit cost of government support to

primary education, which in the same year was 11 per cent of per capita national income [Kelly 1988]. Altogether, parents' current contribution to primary education is much higher than the government outlay. Parents and other members of the community are also making a major contribution to the construction of physical facilities, especially additional classrooms and teachers' houses. The community has by and large been responsible for the extension of many primary schools to become 'basic schools', through the addition of two extra grades (8 and 9). The mechanism for mobilising this community support tends to be the school's Parent-Teachers' Association (PTA) [Kaluba 1988].

Thus the community has come to play a much greater role in educational development than ever before. Indeed, the current Interim National Development Plan states clearly that responsibility for the education of children rests primarily with the parents, and that they must ultimately provide the necessary resources for education [Republic of Zambia 1987a].

The Quality of Education

Although the increased mobilisation of community resources has assisted government in its efforts to maintain, if not expand the education system, it is less clear what has happened to the quality of education. If inputs into the system are used as indicators, then the quality may have suffered very severely. Classes, especially in urban areas, have become more and more overcrowded in order to accommodate larger numbers of pupils; double and even triple sessions have become common. Books and educational materials are very scarce, and for many pupils there are no desks.

Indeed, many primary schools, in both rural and urban areas, offer a pathetic sight. Buildings have deteriorated as damage to floors, windows and roofs has not been repaired. Space is very limited. Classrooms are filled to capacity, and especially in lower grades many pupils crowd together on the floor, leaving little space for the teacher to move about. With windows and doors in a bad state of repair, few teaching materials would survive on the walls. The limited quantities of materials and equipment the school possesses are usually kept in the headmaster's office, with little guarantee of security. Despite the fact that on an aggregate level schools are overstaffed, those outside urban and rural centres frequently have insufficient teachers. Their worsening conditions of service (see above) are only compounded by the fact that general supplies have become more erratic and communication with the outside world more sporadic, due to lack of transport. As a result, not only schools but also District Education Offices have become more isolated, and unable to render the services so badly needed.

It is contended here that this grim picture, while essentially true, is at the same time but a part of the current scene. It conceals other tendencies which have grown over the years, sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, and which in many ways run against 'mainstream' practice and perspectives on education. They concern the individual initiatives of teachers, inspectors, administrators and parents to cope with the crisis in education, leading — sometimes unintentionally — to an assumption of new responsibilities, new structures and a new interpretation of education. Though later in coming, this grassroots response is beginning to realise many of the original intentions of Zambia's educational reforms, and to exert strong pressure on the government to be more forceful in its efforts to reform the system.

The Educational Reform document, which was adopted by the government over 10 years ago after a lengthy national debate [Republic of Zambia 1977], reflected to a large extent the government's socialist aspirations. It saw education as a strong force in the moulding of young people's attitudes and values, the development of relevant skills, and as an instrument for social change. Central concern was given to:

cultivating the values of Humanism and better preparation for citizenship; encouraging pride in Zambia's cultural heritage; bringing education into close contact with production and the world of work; the observance and practice of participatory democracy through internal structures and meaningful links between each educational institution and the community it serves and/or where it is located [Republic of Zambia 1977].

This implied, among other things, attention to practical, pre-vocational skills in the curriculum, the adoption of more child-centred methods, more interaction with the local community, involvement of pupils in decision-making and decentralised administration.

It has been argued [Kelly *et al.* 1986] that the new structures proposed in the Reform document were not commensurate with the above objectives. External control of the institutions persisted through the same administrative hierarchy as existed in pre-independence days. School and community were still viewed as two mutually exclusive entities. Curriculum development remained a highly centralised process, and emphasis was still placed on the academic subjects in preparation for examinations, giving exclusive access to very limited salaried employment opportunities. Moreover, individual syllabuses reveal little attention to Zambia's environment, cultural heritage or traditional values [Kelly *et al.* 1986, chapter 4].

Educational reform, however, is a very slow process. It is one step to adopt a document indicating the general outline of new directions to be followed. It takes many more steps to change institutions and practices,

particularly if they are interwoven with broader socio-economic structures and sustained by prevailing attitudes and interests. Zambia is a case where changing material conditions in the broader society are gradually forcing through a re-orientation of the education system along lines that were very difficult to accept when first proclaimed by politicians and educationists. It is noteworthy that the initiatives come from below and are related to resource mobilisation.

Some of those initiatives are discussed later. They concern activities not related to physical expansion of the system, but to efforts, especially by teachers, to mobilise school resources, and in the process improve not only the relevance of education but also the teachers' own role in educational development.

Production Work in Schools

Self-help activities related to the content and quality of education are mainly the work of teachers, although parents are playing an indirect role through contributions to school funds and participation in the construction of facilities. One area in which teachers have become increasingly active is school production. Production is used here in a broad sense, to mean those activities whereby goods or services are produced that have economic value, and which are either exchanged for cash or contribute to the self-sufficiency of the institution.

Since President Kaunda's proclamation in 1975 that all educational institutions should become production units, schools have put in efforts to develop some production as part of their regular activities. Most production work has been limited to agriculture: some acres of maize, a vegetable garden, and occasionally the keeping of small livestock or growing of fruit. Output has remained low, due to insufficient training of teachers (agriculture is not officially taught at the colleges), lack of tools and poor access to credit.

Over years, however, output has increased and, what is more, interest among teachers and headmasters in what can be achieved through production has also grown. While the total aggregate value of goods produced through the Production Units is low and makes a negligible contribution to the national educational budget [it was just over K1.5 mn in 1986 — see Republic of Zambia 1987b], in this time of economic difficulties the benefits for an individual school can be considerable. Production is a valuable source of revenue, the amount achieved depending on the school's own efforts. Profits make an impact as they are used to purchase stationery, some materials for repair and maintenance, and sundries including transport. Because of this attraction, money raised through production now tends to exceed what is collected directly from parents.

Apart from the official 'Production Unit', other production activities have emerged from practical subjects in the curriculum. One of these has been home economics, a long neglected subject, which has slowly begun to explore areas of production work outside the conventional ones of cooking and bakery, notably the processing of fruits, vegetable and field crops, and food preservation. During the mid-1970s, woodwork, metalwork, building craft, light crafts and leatherwork were (re-) introduced into the upper primary schools. Since that time tools have been distributed, teachers have been trained, teaching materials and handbooks have been prepared, and — of late — workshops have been constructed, all under a longer-term FINNIDA-sponsored project.

One major result of these developments has been that a range of practical skills were brought into the schools, which are gradually being utilised for a variety of purposes: they include maintenance and repair of furniture and buildings, the production of simple tools and utensils, construction of toilets and participation in community projects for the erection of teachers' houses and classroom blocks. It is common for pupils to be involved in these projects. In many schools, pupils also produce sets of small articles for sale, ranging from coathangers to brushes, baskets and belts, the proceeds of which are used to purchase new materials. The aggregate value of all this production has not been calculated, but the physical changes in schools where a concerted effort is made are striking.

There has been much debate internationally about the usefulness and desirability of involving school children in production work. Concern has been expressed about the young age of pupils, their inability to produce items of marketable value, the danger of exploitation, the deflection from the more valuable core subjects in the curriculum, such as language, science and mathematics, as well as about unrealistic aims of premature vocational education. While this concern in many respects is justified, there is also a danger of generalisation and losing sight of specific social and economic circumstances.

The Zambian experience shows that even at primary level, productive activities can be useful and worthwhile, so long as they remain at a low level of sophistication and are seen to contribute mainly towards a more relevant general education for the child. In a village or urban township there are many simple goods (and services) which meet basic local needs and which pupils are learning to produce at school as a form of practical education, and, at the same time, as a productive contribution to school and community life. In many African countries the latter, as an important dimension of the quality of education, is receiving new attention as the exclusive orientation of primary education towards the modern wage sector

is seen more and more to lead to a dead end. In the process pupils acquire manipulative skills, learn more about their social and economic environment and experiment with local materials.

Over the years, the participation of pupils in production in Zambia has come to be accepted, by teachers and slowly also by parents, as an integral part of school life. In fact, it has contributed towards making the school — especially at primary level — a much more ordinary part of the environment, as pupils are involved in activities which are also commonly found in the wider community. Such efforts are unlikely to prepare boys and girls to be skilled workers — indeed the quality of the items produced still leaves much to be desired — but instead of separating them from the world of work, it brings them into more systematic contact with it and offers an opportunity to explore different aspects of production in a protected environment. The major benefits, therefore, of school production have been in the pedagogical and social spheres, while from a micro-economic point of view its contribution to the physical environment of learning cannot be discounted.

The Development of 'Resource Work'

Another important area of self-help activities affecting the content and quality of education is what in Zambia is referred to as 'resource work'. This concept covers all activities organised by teachers and other education personnel aiming at the improvement of their professional competence, and using local resources. Competence is seen in relation to all relevant aspects of professional work, such as administration, classroom management, design and production of teaching and learning aids, teaching methods, management of projects, school-community interaction. As the activities do not include regular in-service courses run by national institutions and funded from government sources, they by and large cover the non-formal side of in-service training.

The essence of resource work is the teachers' direct participation in efforts to improve the quality of education. The basis for this was laid down by the Educational Reforms, which recognised that curriculum development is a two-way process, allowing teachers to initiate innovations, participate in the design of syllabuses and in the writing of new materials. 'Resource teachers' were to be identified, who would receive special training in a particular area and be able to organise workshops for other teachers to discuss new methods, produce teaching aids, and evaluate curricular changes [Republic of Zambia 1977:31]. Focal points for such activities would be 'Teachers' Centres', which could also host other self-initiated programmes, such as in-service training and criticism of classroom practice [Republic of Zambia 1977:66].

Resource work developed strong roots in the early 1980s when in many districts around the country inspectors, together with 'teacher-resource coordinators', began to organise schools as 'School-based Teachers' Centres', group a number of them into zones and help to organise professional meetings and workshops. Some districts established 'Resource Committees' or 'Educational Reform Committees', and initiated activities for different categories of teachers, administrators and community leaders on a variety of topics. The efforts were backed up by several national training seminars sponsored by UNICEF.

Initially, 'Teachers' Centres' were conceived merely in abstract terms, in that professionally each school was to start functioning as a Teachers' Centre. More recently many schools, especially those serving as zone centres, have established 'resource rooms' to house the collection of largely self-produced teaching and learning materials. Some districts now have a 'Resource Centre', often a renovated building, where meetings are held, and materials are produced, stored or displayed. The centres are run by committees of teachers and headmasters and the local inspector.

A result of these developments has been that in more and more schools, teaching aids (such as maps, charts, models, supplementary readers, apparatus) have begun to reappear in the classrooms. Monitoring visits around the country have shown that the pace at which this happens varies widely, particularly as it appears to depend heavily on teachers' own interest, support by headmasters and the organisational capabilities of the local committees. Also, the range and quality of teaching aids is uneven, as many teachers do not have skills in design or sufficient knowledge of local materials. While such aids do not compensate for textbooks (they are supplied through a donor-funded project), they form a vital input into the teaching-learning process and help stem the drift — caused by high enrolments and lack of government supplies — towards traditional 'chalk and talk' methods. Perhaps the biggest gain of resource work, however, has been the restoration of many teachers' confidence in their own profession, and the overcoming of feelings of abandonment in the face of rapidly deteriorating personal and professional conditions.

Around the country scores of teachers have made a contribution to this development. They have been encouraged by the fact that they were identified by inspectors on the basis of merit and talent, and were given special responsibilities. There is ample evidence that this recognition and new responsibility has led to personal sacrifice in terms of time, energy and money in the effort of mobilising fellow teachers. Any personal gain cannot be counted in financial terms (there is no money for allowances), but perhaps only in terms of experience, skills gained through additional training and a possible chance to receive special consideration for promotion.

Government Response: the Challenges of Decentralisation

Parental and teachers' self-help in education has become a significant development in Zambia. Although the involvement of the community in school construction and maintenance had been witnessed earlier, especially just before and after independence, it can be argued that there is an important difference in quality, in that the current self-reliance constitutes not merely the topping up of already generous government funding, but in vital areas of education has virtually come to replace the state's contribution. It is also unlikely that this situation will change in the foreseeable future. Parents are told in no uncertain terms about their new responsibilities for sharing the costs, and it will be a matter of time before arrangements are worked out to formalise community involvement. One step in this direction is the proposed conversion of PTAs into formal cooperative societies. In addition, donors have been urged by the government to help prepare teachers, parents and community leaders for a more active involvement in education and for better cooperation. Thus, the current involvement of the grassroots is not going to be a passing phenomenon, and it may have a deep impact on the further development of the system.

In what direction this impact will go is still rather uncertain. The Educational Reforms singled out decentralisation as an important objective. Through the Local Administration Act (1980), District Councils have been given powers to control and disburse funds originating from central government to primary schools. It has been government's intention to allow councils to raise local taxes for education, but the necessary legislation has not yet been passed [Kelly 1988:5]. What role the District Councils will play as against PTA-Cooperatives in resource mobilisation and school development is not yet clear. Nor is it apparent whether parental involvement will remain limited to school construction and maintenance. It is possible that at some stage in the future parents and community will want to use their newly acquired financial role to gain a greater say in what actually goes on inside the school. As we have seen, this is not the case at present, and parental concern is more for quantitative expansion than for quality control.

The involvement of the teachers is a different matter. Through resource work, a cadre of teachers is being developed who, organised in committees, are taking a greater responsibility for the actual teaching-learning activities in the schools. By so doing they are effectively filling the gap left by the forced retreat of the central government with its education officers, inspectors and curriculum developers.

A critical issue will be to what extent and in what ways the government will alter its own interactions with the

schools and the local authorities in education. The tradition has been one of centralised control, leaving little room for decision-making lower down the hierarchy. The challenge for government will be to allow greater school and community participation in the financing of education to be accompanied by a measure of formal delegation of decision-making. There is room for a further redefinition of the cooperation between the central ministries of education, their branches in the regions, local councils, parents and teachers, harmonising the need for central supervision, coordination and guidance with effective local participation.

The Self-Help Action Plan for Education

An example of a programme in which government, (Scandinavian) donors and teachers have combined in an effort to strengthen and guide the development of local participation is the Self-Help Action Plan for Education (SHAPE), which is currently being implemented in Zambia. The main purpose of this programme is to enhance the capacity of schools and (Teacher Training) Colleges for self-help in professional and material terms. It assists the various initiatives of teachers, inspectors and administrators to improve the quality of education through the mobilisation of local resources — both in material and in human terms — and to organise a variety of self-directed activities. The support comes in various ways: assistance with organisational development, particularly the expansion of a system of committees from the school level to the regions and colleges; training of the many teachers, inspectors and lecturers who serve as resource teachers, in-service training (INSET) and production coordinators at different levels; curriculum development, especially in relation to production; monitoring and evaluation; subsidisation of resource work among teachers; funding for materials and equipment for Resource Centres; selective support for school production projects; and assistance with appropriate forms of transport for coordinators. The programme is implemented by a management team consisting largely of inspectors in the headquarters of Zambia's two ministries of education [Republic of Zambia 1988].

The novelties of SHAPE are that it brings two important aspects of self-help — school production and resource work — together; that support is conditional upon evidence of self-help; and that it is implemented by acknowledging and assigning new roles to persons already in the education system. Committees of teachers and administrators have been reconstituted as SHAPE Coordinating Committees, including coordinators for both production and resource work [Republic of Zambia 1987c]. By so doing they are made to benefit each other: production work will be somewhat expanded so as to provide

financial support to resource work, part of which in turn is directed at improving the educational value of production in the schools. It has already been shown that lost-cost school-based resource work can be fully financed through modest contributions from production profits. An important advantage of this is that it avoids parents from being taxed even further, while it shows government and donors the seriousness of the teachers' commitment.

In order to stimulate the scope, quality and effectiveness of self-help, financial and material support is related to the activity levels of the committees and to some extent to efforts at mobilising local funds, mainly through school production. Such support works as an incentive, and along with workshops and seminars for various cadre of personnel, it has already initiated a trend of more schools and more teachers and headteachers participating in school production as well as in resource work. The effect of all this on classroom work and pupil learning will need to be monitored very closely.

A major asset of the SHAPE programme is that the government has recognised the importance of the teachers' contribution to educational development and has found a meaningful way to respond to their need for support and guidance. Many teachers have been given additional responsibilities on a voluntary basis which they carry out without extra emoluments. The inspector's function of supervision and control is complemented by that of being an itinerant teacher-educator and adviser. Colleges are experimenting with a new role of offering in-service programmes and guidance to teachers through their own emerging Resource Centres. Administrators are adjusting to working *with* teachers and parents, and many have shown great aptitude for doing so.

Thus the programme has become part of a learning experience for officers up and down the system in moving towards greater coordination, more responsiveness to local initiatives, more school-community self-reliance in educational development, and more joint efforts to grapple with the many problems in education. In the long term, if the learning succeeds, this reform in education may be among the best outcomes of the economic crisis.

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