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Education in the 21st century: a Zimbabwean perspective

Speech to the 56th Congress of Liberal International: Cairo 30th October 2009, By Senator David Coltart

Introduction

When I last attended a meeting of Liberal International held in Dakar, Senegal, in October 2003 I never imagined that I would be speaking to you all today on the topic "Education in the 21st century". In that previous life I was a human rights lawyer. I am not an educationalist nor do I make any pretensions about being one and so to that extent I feel ill qualified to address this topic.

Since being sworn in as Minister of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture on the 13th February 2009 I have become increasingly convinced that I was given the job because no one else wanted it! The job fell to me as a result of the long and tortuous mediation process facilitated by SADC which commenced shortly after the shocking torture of Morgan Tsvangirai in March 2007 and which culminated in the signing of what we term the Global Political Agreement (GPA) by Zanu PF, and the two MDC factions, MDC T and the MDC M, in September 2008.

The reason I was allocated education has much to do with the character of the three political parties and their interrelations. Zanu PF, which describes itself as a Marxist Leninist party, was only interested in the coercive ministries, such as defence, and ministries which would provide rich pickings for corruption such as mining. Our sister party, the larger formation of the MDC, is like the ANC a broad church, in that it includes a broad spectrum of political views ranging from socialists/trade unionists and workers on the left to some conservative farmers on the right. It was very much focused on ministries that would provide a strong counterweight to Zanu PF's powers such as finance, labour, home affairs and constitutional affairs. The party I represent, the MDC M, secured just under 9% of the vote in the March 2008 elections, is liberal democratic in outlook and controls the balance of power in the lower house of parliament with Zanu PF and the MDC T having secured an almost equal number of seats.

In that context it is not surprising that neither of the two major political parties would want education. The ministry carries very little political weight unless it can be operated efficiently and I'm sure the assumption of the two other parties was that the education sector was in such a mess that progress was a remote possibility. In contrast we saw education as a key ministry; whilst we appreciated that the challenges were enormous we felt that through the transformation of education we would be able to influence the coming generation in a unique way regarding our liberal democratic agenda. At this juncture I need to stress that as Helen Zille stated in her speech to the Liberal International Congress in May 2008 we also do not use the term "liberal" as it is also widely misunderstood in Zimbabwe and used pejoratively.

When I took office in February 2009 I knew that the education sector was in a mess but could not anticipate just how bad it was. My first day in head office was an education in itself! When I first arrived at the reception area of the 18 story head office building I was confronted with the spectre of several women members of staff standing around waiting for the lift with buckets of water on their heads. It was reminiscent of a typical rural African scene where women have to convey water for kilometres to clean and feed their families. I was told that the reason they were carrying water was because there was no water in the entire building and there had not been any

water for over a year. Only one of the three lifts was working; when I finally got to my office on the 14th floor I found that I had no computer, no internet and no access to any computerised database within the ministry. To compound matters the first order of business was a message lying on my desk that I should immediately go to the government transport ministry to collect a brand-new Mercedes-Benz limousine! My first act in the ministry was to decline the offer. On the day I took office almost 7000 schools were effectively shut because over 80,000 teachers were on strike. I was aware that government coffers were bare and it was incomprehensible to imagine how I could negotiate in good faith with the unions if my first act was to continue the profligate behaviour of my predecessors.

What I found in head office was emblematic of virtually every school and other educational institution in the country. It is now clear to me that the education sector has been seriously underfunded for two decades. Whilst it is true that historically Zimbabwe obtained a reputation for having high educational standards and high literacy rates the reality is that educational standards and literacy rates have been plummeting for almost 2 decades. In truth I have inherited the mere shell of an education system, a situation which has been compounded by the fact that there have been minimal resources to remedy matters available to me since taking office. In the eight months since I've taken office, up to the end of September 2009, the entire ministry received from Treasury the princely sum of US \$ 1,962,057 to run over 7000 schools and educate some 3 million children! Because of deep concern in the international community about the slow pace of implementation of the GPA the international community has been extremely reticent in providing any assistance, even to the education sector.

In that context you will appreciate why as I approach this topic I have set some very modest goals for education in the short term such as the restoration of the basic education. Accordingly my view of education in the 21st century is predicated on vastly different assumptions to those that most of you present here today will have. The silver lining for me is that in some respects I have a clean slate to work with. Accordingly as we consider in this conference our collective vision for education in the 21st Century, and the role that education should play in a modern society, I believe that I have a unique opportunity to entrench certain liberal principles in the transformation of the Zimbabwean education sector.

The application of liberal principles in formulating education policy

Tolerance/Democracy

Despite the current chaos in the Zimbabwean education system it still has one of the best infrastructures in Africa. In addition the Zimbabwean education system has generated thousands of highly talented people during the last five decades who have achieved magnificently in the fields of science, business, agriculture, medicine and other disciplines throughout the world. Until recently we still had one of the highest literacy rates in Africa. However during the same five decades Zimbabwe has lurched from one form of authoritarian rule to another. . The use of violence to attain political objectives is still widespread. There are high levels of intolerance in political parties against those who hold different views. In short we have a deeply rooted culture of violence and intolerance. What pertains in the political sphere is reflected in the personal and in the schools. A recent Zimbabwean study reveals that there are alarmingly high levels of bullying and sexual abuse taking place within our schools. In our wider society there are unacceptably high levels of domestic violence

A positive aspect of our schools is that most children are generally well disciplined. However my fear is that discipline has been taken to excessive levels in our education system; that the unquestioning respect for authority over several decades has resulted in a society which has allowed this culture of impunity and violence to become the norm. Furthermore the way that history has been taught in Rhodesian and then Zimbabwean schools over many decades has contributed to the notion that political leaders are demigods. That was certainly what was taught in white

Rhodesian schools: Cecil John Rhodes and Ian Douglas Smith were elevated to the status of cult heroes. Little has changed since the advent of independence save for the fact that these political leaders have been replaced by Robert Gabriel Mugabe and other nationalist leaders. In other words I believe that one of the principal reasons why Zimbabwe has degenerated is because of serious flaws in our education system.

The problem goes beyond the content that is taught in the classroom. The method of school governance is as important as what is taught. School children imitate in their adult lives the ways in which Headmasters and teachers and prefects conduct themselves in school. In fact the role that prefects are handed in schools where they are present is not that of leadership apprentices; prefects are handed the role of discipline, and all too often are allowed and even encouraged to be cruel and brutal, victimising younger children. Although corporal punishment is in theory illegal except under strictly controlled conditions, it is widespread at all levels of primary and secondary education. Our schools, instead of developing ideas of democratic leadership, are breeding a new generation of tyrants and bullies.

Furthermore we have inherited a colonial system of classroom learning practice which we have not seriously attempted to change. The teacher and the textbook are the authority and children are taught not to question, not to think creatively or imaginatively. Fear does not just govern issues of discipline – it governs the very learning process and rote learning still holds sway, discouraging children from taking responsibility for their own learning or attempting to think for themselves

In an effort to reverse this trend I am in the process of implementing two policies:

1. I am working in conjunction with human rights groups in Zimbabwe to develop a new curriculum which will teach schoolchildren democratic principles, their rights as enshrined in the constitution and UN conventions, the virtues of tolerance and the use of nonviolent methods to resolve conflict.
2. I am in the process of revising subsidiary legislation to democratise the governance of schools. In terms of this legislation school heads will be compelled to be more transparent in their work. The same legislation will encourage greater parental involvement in schools with the aim of opening up more debate regarding, and community participation in, the way in which schools are run. We need to create a school environment in which children are encouraged to develop whatever potential they have in an open atmosphere which will produce the best results both academically and developmentally

I should stress that my intention is not to lessen the amount of discipline in our schools. My objective is to achieve the fine balance between maintaining orderly, disciplined schools and allowing freer debate and democratic practices. It is my hope that if these policies are successful we will spawn an entirely new generation of Zimbabweans who will cherish democratic practices and ensure that Zimbabwe never again goes through the horrors it has experienced in the last five decades.

Small Government/ Devolution of power

I have inherited a ministry of education which is highly bureaucratic and top-heavy. As indicated above we are headquartered in a large 18 story building. In the past the bureaucracy housed there tightly controlled all aspects of education in both government and non-government schools. Indeed my predecessor waged a virtual war against private schools and in the process severely undermined confidence of the business sector in our educational system. That in turn accelerated the flight of professionals and other highly mobile citizens.

The high level of control extended beyond elite private schools. Excessive bureaucracy was used to prevent the emergence of private schools for poorer people. The maintenance of these controls in turn has resulted in a top heavy budget. Since taking office in February I have noted that the

bulk of the little money that we have received from Treasury has been spent in maintaining the work of head office and there has been very little trickle-down of resources to schools themselves. The problem does not appear to be confined to Zimbabwe; Australians complain of a “top heavy, inefficient, and self-serving system”^[1].

It is also clear that given the collapse of the Zimbabwean economy even with the best will in the world the Zimbabwean government is not going to be able to educate everyone. In the last few years the dropout rate, especially in the transition from primary to secondary schooling, has reached alarming levels. The infrastructure in most government schools is crumbling and textbook/pupil ratios are appalling. In short in the next decade it is going to be very difficult for government to expand education and our work is going to be cut out simply maintaining what we already have.

In these circumstances it seems to me that the only way we are going to be able to educate all our children is if we liberalise the education sector and allow parents to establish their own private schools at village level, subject of course to compliance with certain basic standards. In this regard I have been inspired by James Tooley’s book published this year called “The Beautiful Tree”². Tooley describes his book as a personal journey into how the world’s poorest people are educating themselves. The “beautiful tree” refers to the system of village schools set up by Indians prior to British colonial rule, uprooted by the British when they came to India, as described by Mahatma Gandhi in a speech he delivered at Chatham House, London on October 20, 1931. In that speech Gandhi concluded:

"And the schools established after the European pattern were too expensive for the people. I defy anyone to fulfil a programme of compulsory primary education of these masses inside of a century. This very poor country of mine is ill able to sustain such an expensive method of education. Our state would revive the old village schoolmaster and dot every village with a school both for boys and girls."

Tooley points out that the concept of village schools was not confined to India: Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of independent Kenya, published *Facing Mount Kenya* in 1938 in which he argued that African society had its own tradition of universal education that “begins at the time of birth and ends with death. The parents take the responsibility of educating their children until they reach the stage of tribal education... there is no special school building... the homestead is the school”. Kenyatta believed that this education system had some advantages over the British system in that, for example, it emphasised acquiring practical knowledge in its context.³

In many developing countries many parents are turning to small private schools to educate their children. As Buckingham points out even in developed countries such as Australia there has been a steady drift out of the public sector. Research has shown that providing parents with the means to send children to the school of their choice has significant academic benefits for children and private schools overall outperform public schools consistently in academic achievement.⁴

In the Zimbabwean context this does not mean the end of government education. However if we are going to extend a quality education to as many children as possible the following policies are necessary:

¹ “Schools must be truly public.” Contained in “Schools of Thought” a book published by the Centre of Independent Studies in July 2008 authored by Jennifer Buckingham.

² Published by the Cato Institute 2009.

³ Tooley at page 241.

⁴ Buckingham at page 2.

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1. A reduction in the size and scope of the ministry of education which should concentrate on the administration of funding, providing professional support to education providers, and being responsible for developing and administering minimum standards and public examinations.
 2. A devolution of power to all schools, both government and non-government, to enable them to operate virtually autonomously according to the wishes of the parents and communities that support them.
 3. Legislation that will allow and facilitate parents to establish their own independent schools without having to go through the many bureaucratic hoops present today.
 4. A change in budgetary policy which ensures that a much greater percentage of government funding is spent in schools themselves rather than in a top-heavy administration.

National and International Budgetary priorities

For all the rhetoric about the Zimbabwean government's commitment to education the fact remains that during the last two decades there has been a steady reduction in the amount allocated to education both in real terms and in terms of a proportion of GDP. Sadly even since the formation of the transitional inclusive government in February the amount of money allocated to the Ministry of Education has been much lower in percentage terms, and in some respects in real terms, than many other ministries. For example the Office of the President and Cabinet and the Ministry of Industry and Commerce have both received more money in real terms since February this year than the Ministry of Education has.

In other words successive governments have merely paid lip service to the notion that it is important to invest heavily in education. I suspect that this is the case in many countries throughout the world. There are some exceptions. Finland for example has arguably the best education system in the world; but to achieve that Finland has invested heavily in education for decades. One of the most remarkable aspects of the Finnish education system is that the minimum qualification for all teachers in both Primary and Secondary schools is a Masters degree – the cost of achieving that standard must have entailed a massive investment and cut backs in other areas. In Zimbabwe during the last two decades we have spent heavily on our defence forces, the secret police, excessive foreign travel, luxuries (such as Mercedes-Benz vehicles) for Cabinet ministers and other leaders and a bloated bureaucracy including a Reserve Bank with a voracious appetite. During the same period education has been starved of funding.

If we are to restore a quality education in Zimbabwe we are going to have to cut back drastically on the spending mentioned above and reallocate the money saved to education. Even if we do so in the short to medium term we will not have sufficient resources to provide even a quality basic education to all our children.

In this regard the international community itself needs to decide whether education for all is a fundamental pre-requisite to international peace, stability and development.

For example if we move away from Africa and Zimbabwe for a moment it would be interesting to know what proportion of the money spent on Iraq and Afghanistan by the international community has been invested in the education sectors of those countries. It seems to me that only a tiny proportion of the billions of dollars spent on Iraq have gone to education. It seems self evident to me that the best guarantor in the medium to long term of world peace and stability is a well educated new generation of people in every country in the world. This will only be financially possible if defence budgets are slashed throughout the world and swords converted into laptops and textbooks.

The environment

The threat presented by environmental degradation and climate change to man's very existence is not only global; it exists within our region of Africa and it exists within every nation including Zimbabwe.

In the last 50 years Madagascar, for example, has experienced a 10% increase in its mean average temperature and a 10% decline in its rainfall. There has been so much erosion that the sea is coloured red around all its river mouths. It is perhaps one of the starkest examples of the effects of global warming and poor land management and farming practices; nevertheless many other countries' environment is under severe threat and Zimbabwe is no exception.

Aside from the chaotic land reform programme implemented in Zimbabwe in the last decade, crop yields in communal areas, which have been unaffected by the land reform programme, have been steadily declining. Much of that is due to massive erosion and the depletion of nutrients in our soils. Dams are silting up and the Kalahari desert is rapidly encroaching in the south west of Zimbabwe. The situation is further compounded by the rapid deforestation of indigenous trees caused by the shortage of energy in communal areas and the wanton chopping of trees by "new farmers" who have stripped the land they acquired of resources for sale rather than engage in the hard work of farming.

Despite this gloomy scenario there have been some encouraging developments in the last two decades. In particular an organisation called Foundations for Farming has been spearheading the concept of conservation farming and zero tillage agricultural practices in Zimbabwe. The organisation's work has been focused on the poorest communal areas and they are achieving remarkable results. For example last year whilst the average crop yield countrywide was 275 kg per hectare, the average crop yield in plots using conservation farming practices was 3 tonnes per hectare. Aside from the increased crop yields erosion has been dramatically reduced and these farming practices do not need imported tractors, diesel and vast numbers of plough oxen. Indeed if we can persuade the coming generation to embrace these farming practices Zimbabwe will be transformed in a variety of ways; not only will our pastures be restored but Zimbabwe will once again become a net food exporter - irrespective of what happens in former lands owned by white commercial farmers. The challenge is to teach the coming generation about these remarkable farming practices.

With the environment in mind I am now implementing the following policies:

1. A new conservation farming curriculum is being developed and the first training programme for teachers from throughout Zimbabwe has already been held. In the course of the next five years our intention is to roll out the conservation farming programme which will result in every single rural school teaching a four-year curriculum and every school having its own plot which will at the same time supplement the food requirements of these schools. Our intention is to include local communities so that the schools spearhead much more widespread knowledge of conservation farming.
2. As and when funding is available our intention is to work with local industry to manufacture solar cooking apparatus which will be installed in every rural school. Once again the intention is to use good practices in schools to inspire entire communities in an effort to reduce deforestation and to promote the use of alternative and sustainable means of energy.
3. As and when funding is available our intention is to work with local nurseries to develop indigenous tree nurseries in all schools. Once the nurseries have been established schools will embark on the planting of indigenous trees throughout Zimbabwe with the same hope that surrounding communities will adopt similar practices. In this regard real business opportunities exist through carbon credit schemes now being promoted in the West. If the programs can be implemented on a large scale throughout Zimbabwe my hope is that

income which can come through participation in carbon credit schemes will be used to subsidise education costs.

Practical basic education/Vocational education

Several mistakes were made in Zimbabwe in the development of education after Independence. One was to think that we could do everything at once; many educationalists at the time of great expansion in the 1980s who had some knowledge of the relationship between education and development knew that it was wrong to expand without adequate resources, mainly human but also physical. Standards were bound to fall drastically even if the economy had not collapsed. Donors themselves did not appear to appreciate the problem. Hundreds of millions of dollars of Western aid was poured into erecting educational infrastructure most of which has fallen into disrepair and some into complete disuse. Government had a “can-do” attitude, believing when there were few teachers that failed school leavers could be let loose in the classroom without any training, little maturity and minimal interest. Numbers became the Holy Grail and quality of education was overlooked.

A second serious mistake was to embark on an almost exclusively academic educational curriculum. This approach arose from a misinterpretation of the idea of “equality” to mean that everyone must have the same education and that must be academic. Very little attention was paid to vocational, practical training, and existing facilities were actually dismantled and abandoned. Once again in this regard I am struck by the Finnish education system which pays equal attention to academic and vocational education facilities. Zimbabwe did not do this and in the last two decades has generated several hundred thousand school graduates with academic qualifications who stand no chance whatsoever of getting appropriate jobs within Zimbabwe. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that these same graduates have come out of school with no practical skills which would enable them to become self-employed.

While we will aim at educating every child, the nature of their education must be altered to ensure that it is relevant to economic development; especially within their own communities. Children must learn skills that are needed by the economy or can enable them to create their own work. Then the money put into education becomes a genuine investment rather than a costly consumption item.

In an effort to address this issue the following policies are necessary:

1. Our emphasis, in honouring every child's right to education, must be to teach children the basics of literacy and numeracy. Every child should receive a basic education which in my view should enable every child to speak, read and write their mother tongue and English, to have fundamental numeracy skills and to come out of school with at least one practical skill.
2. An important curricular theme must be to teach survival techniques - at the personal, family, societal and global level. Children must learn individually and collectively to survive - this means practical learning in areas of productivity for food security and employment, health, care for the environment, strategic thinking and planning, adaptability, co-operation and imagination. Good “survival teaching” should take place in a specific physical environment and education must help children to relate to that environment rather than dreaming about being somewhere else.
3. Whilst technology is an important component of a modern education system, appropriate technology is more important than rushing for the latest from the developed world.
4. To carry out these policies we will need to aggressively expand the number of schools offering vocational education.

Identifying and nurturing talented disadvantaged children/The Girl Child

One of the dangers of focusing almost exclusively on the provision of a basic education for all children is that talented children from disadvantaged backgrounds may be lost in the mediocrity of a basic education. Whilst Zimbabwe has exceptionally good church and independent schools they are beyond the financial reach of the vast majority of Zimbabwean parents. One of my deepest concerns as I seek to stabilise and rehabilitate Zimbabwe's education system is that an entire generation of highly talented potential academics, sports persons and artists will be lost. If this happens Zimbabwe will not get the necessary throughput of these talented children to our universities, sporting, artistic and cultural institutions. Without that throughput Zimbabwe's economic development will be severely retarded. Private schools simply do not generate a sufficient number of talented students which the country will need in future.

This problem is apparently not only confined to a developing country like Zimbabwe. Buckingham notes that in Australia the emphasis on identifying and assisting children at risk of failing to achieve basic education may be necessary for valid personal and public reasons; but it has resulted in children who have the potential to excel rarely getting a look in. The concern is that in all levels of government and in most schools, interest in underperforming students eclipsed the need to provide a high-quality education for highly capable students. In America Charles Murray in his new book *Real Education: Four simple truths to bring American schools back to reality* argues that more effort needs to be expended on thinking about the kind of education needed by the young people who will in future run a country.⁵

Another very troubling development in Zimbabwe is the disproportionately high dropout rate of the girl child, especially in the transition from primary schooling to secondary schooling. Research the world over shows that when the girl child's education is neglected birth-rates continue to soar and development is severely retarded.

With these problems in mind I am implementing the following policies:

1. We have entered into a public private partnership agreement to initially rehabilitate 20 Government secondary schools, one boys' high school and one girls' high school in all of Zimbabwe's 10 provinces. The schools targeted already have extensive infrastructure and boarding facilities which have however deteriorated over the last 20 years. At the same time a program will be initiated to identify academically, sporting or artistically talented children in the poorest rural and high density urban schools. A scholarship fund will be created which will ensure that these children can then be channelled into the rehabilitated government schools which will become known as Academies. Some of the Academies will have particular centres of excellence to teach particular academic, sporting or artistic disciplines. It is envisaged that approximately 40% of the intake at these Academies will be reserved for talented disadvantaged children. The balance of places will be filled by children whose parents/guardians can afford to pay higher fees than those pertaining at standard government schools. It should be emphasised that there will be strict gender equality in granting scholarships to ensure a steady throughput of girls.
2. Government budgetary policy is being reviewed to ensure that as many government resources as possible are directed to programmes that encourage the girl child to go to school and that at the very least all girls obtain a basic education.

Conclusion

⁵ Buckingham at page 65.

I am aware that these are lofty and highly ambitious goals. Our human and financial resources are severely depleted and as a result we have limited capacity to implement most of these policies successfully. Indeed without substantial international support most of these policies will remain stillborn. However it is vitally important that we succeed. Zimbabwe, as is the case in so many African countries, is a land of great potential. It is richly endowed with natural resources; it is a stunningly beautiful country with wonderful people. Despite these great attributes Zimbabwe has been a drain on the entire region in the last decade. That does not need to be the case; indeed Zimbabwe has the potential to contribute significantly to the wealth of southern Africa. Arguably the most important element in achieving this is the re-establishment of a quality educational system . This can only happen if, firstly, the Zimbabwean government takes education seriously and invests heavily in the sector, secondly, if the international community joins suit and does the same, and thirdly if we get the content and management of education right.

Whilst Zimbabwe's challenges in education are unique in one sense, many of the issues raised today affect us all. Education has an important role in moulding the 21st Century and in dealing with the challenges presented by it. If we do not educate the coming generation to be tolerant, to cherish democracy and to find practical solutions to issues such as poverty, environmental degradation and global warming which threaten the very existence of mankind, the future will be bleak. However if we transform this generation then the great technological advances of the 20th Century may be matched by a more humane and earth friendly 21st Century.

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