

'Don't trust outside experts'

As the possible but still disputed opening of the National Constitutional Conference (NCC) draws near, it is all the more important to emphasise the priority issues of concern for Zambia's new constitution. Surely a number one priority must be a new Bill of Rights in the new constitution, a Bill that incorporates the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR) so central to the integral development that all Zambian citizens desire and deserve.

This fact came home to me once again very strongly when I participated in a meeting of development "experts" a short time ago, discussing the challenge for Zambia to promote "social growth." That phrase refers to the process whereby favourable economic indicators (e.g. higher rates of GDP growth, lower rates of inflation, more new investments) would be accompanied by more favourable social indicators (e.g. higher life expectancy, lower infant mortality, better housing conditions).

As Zambians know all too well, this country is not experiencing integral human development since the much acclaimed economic growth is not benefiting the majority of the ordinary citizens. The Republican President himself called attention recently to the need to address that situation. Incorporating ESCR in our Bill of Rights will necessitate addressing that fact in a wise fashion of

"progressive realisation." (See our JCTR website for further clarification of this number one priority and the campaign to put ESCR in the constitution: www.jctr.org.zm.)

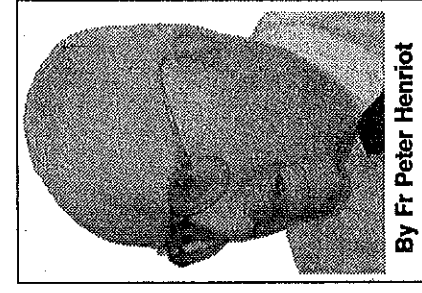
The discussion I participated in was a private exchange between some locally-based development professionals and a group of foreign academics of high repute and several senior officials of an international development agency based outside Zambia. The focus of the discussion was how to promote social growth in Zambia. It aimed to provide a clear analysis of the problem and a set of recommendations for action, both by the Zambian government and by our cooperating partners.

I was both disappointed and disturbed by the course of the discussion and what it might mean for Zambia's future. Two things struck me: 1) the inadequate information base, and 2) the unrealistic policy recommendations. There was plenty of quantitative information shared by the outside experts: figures, statistics, charts, graphs, equations, etc. Some qualitative information was shared by one individual who had actually visited Zambia. But the strongest comments were being made by those who had no hesitancy in acknowledging that they have never come to

this country that they "knew so well" through the reports they had read. But there was a lack of awareness about some recent very important reports.

One example struck me when heavy praise was heaped on the "good process" of the privatisation of the mines was talked about. While it is true that the sale of the mines curtailed the bleeding of government budget resources, it is also true that the secret agreements between the government and the foreign companies purchasing the mines laid the grounds for great injustices to be imposed on the Zambian people. Low royalty taxes, lenient environmental standards, poor wages and conditions for workers, etc, were the consequences of these secret agreements.

Surely no one should evaluate the privatisation process without both visiting the mines and studying these recent reports, e.g., "For Whom the Windfalls?". I'm reminded of two World Bank consultants I met in the early 1990s who have just presented to the government a comprehensive and far-reaching policy plan for the future of Zambia's agricultural sector. When I asked them how long they had been in the country studying our agricultural situation they readily replied: "Oh we only came



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in yesterday to present the report, but we have all the data in Washington DC!"

Possibly it was the lack of good analysis that brought forth the strong recommendations offered by some of the outside experts. While not all of the non-Zambian based participants might have agreed with the recommendations (I hope not!), still the tone was strong enough to really cause me serious concern.

For instance, it was advised that when there is a trade off between economic growth and attending to the social conditions of the people, it was much better to put resources and energies behind the cause of economic growth. Some social benefits could later "trickle down" to the poor. But this approach ignores the best of experience ("trickle down" theories have few stories of actual success) and goes against the best of the new eco-

nomic thinking. Nobel Prize winners Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz have pointed out the obvious need to pay attention to policies that benefit the poor if any sustainable economic growth is to be instituted and sustained.

Another recommendation was offered that social investments, for instance in the education and health sectors, should be avoided because this could lead to a movement of personnel and resources away from the productive sectors of business and commerce. Pay teachers, doctors and nurses good salaries and there would be an exodus of competent people toward these social sectors and away from sectors that make more contribution to the growth of the economy.

I hope that such a recommendation was not made seriously. Investment in educated and healthy people is certainly productive investment as well as a commitment to the fundamental rights to education and health care. Our new constitution should assure that!

One final recommendation sounded so incredible to me - and to others of us in Zambia who were participating in the discussion - that I doubt it will ever have any consequence. That is the proposal to move people out of the rural areas into urban

areas. Too many problems with agricultural ups and downs in Zambia, so just get the people out of the countryside and into the cities. After all, that is where real productivity goes on - e.g., in the mines!

So, what did I learn from participating in these discussions with outside experts? Three lessons. First, our government should put its primary trust in local professionals who know the real world of Zambia, while still being open to outside input, critique and suggestions. Second, outsiders should hold back their opinions until they have been on the ground and have consulted local professionals.

And third, both local and outside professionals, policy makers in various ministries, MPs, development workers, business and labour officials should remember that the main resource for Zambian development are the people themselves. Hence the main measurement for evaluating the success of failure of our development programmes is to ask boldly and answer honestly: "What is happening to the people?"

Let the answer to that basic question be our guide in economic policies and our prod. in constitutional review!
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