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Kampf gegen Mangel- und Unterernährung: Schlüssel zur Gesundheit in Entwicklungsländern

Experiences of ActionAid International Zambia

Fighting Malnutrition – Advocacy for the Right to Food

Von Pamela Chisanga

Watching the Zambian elite at work on the country's national constitution making process has made many people fearful for Zambia's future. This half-hearted exercise has cost over £18m and has been marked not just by nepotism, but more by the removal of basic rights which threaten the country's ability to reach the Millennium Development Goals. These rights include basic rights such as the right to portable drinking water, effective sanitation and the right to food.



The government paid lip-service to the principle of including ordinary people in the constitution making process, particularly at the most critical stages. The draft document was “presented” to the people of Zambia: a 900 page technical document, in English rather than any of the nine local languages, and uploaded to the web, which most people can't access. The delegates at the National Constitution Conference, a group leading the process of developing the country's constitution, is composed of ex-politicians, business people and academics, all close to the current government. This is contrary to popular demands by civil society to have a Constituent Assembly spearhead this process.

Perhaps the most tragic part of this is not the fact that delegates to this constitution conference would faithfully turn up in the morning, sign in and trickle out of the conference hall leaving it nearly empty until late afternoon when they had to be present to sign out and thus guarantee their GBP 135 daily attendance allowance in a country where most people live below GBP 1.25 a day, but rather that this group laughed at the idea of a nation being able to guarantee basic rights for its citizens. As the chairperson of the human rights committee of the conference made his presentation on the right to food, noting that “Every person has the right to be free from hunger and to have access to food in adequate quantities, of adequate quality and cultural acceptability” the delegates burst into laughter and dismissed this out rightly, in spite of pleas by a few to perhaps amend the wording of the provisions.

The Right to Food in Zambia

It is this callous dismissal of such fundamental rights that prompted ActionAid International Zambia (AAIZ) to mobilise other civil society organisations to challenge such decisions. Incidentally, civil society has distanced itself from the process as it is not 'right' – but AAIZ realising the danger that lies in just keeping quiet because we do not agree with the process, decided at this point to engage and challenge government both on the process and content and to highlight the flaws.

The current constitution of the country was last amended in 1991. The amendment was piecemeal even though many had hoped for a complete review of the constitution. Since then, Zambia has seen various processes to review and amend the republican constitution. The current constitution making process started with a constitution review commission broadly consulting citizens (at great cost) to input into the development of the constitution. The commission then produced a draft constitution that is now reviewed by the highly criticised national constitution conference that seems to have changed most of the provisions that were seen as important by many people in the country. It is this 2005 draft constitution that provided for the right to food, water and sanitation under the Bill of Right, a clause, as noted, that the national constitution conference laughed at and completely rejected as unrealistic and untenable for government. The current constitution in force under the Bill of Rights mostly provides for Civil and Political Rights and some Cultural Rights. Other Economic and Social Rights are not found in the Bill of Rights but are found under the Directive Principles of State Policy. These rights are therefore not legally enforceable and as such it is difficult to hold government to account for non implementation of these rights.

Zambia Basic Data

ActionAid has made a decision to focus specifically on the right to food as this is a fundamental area of our work and also mainly due to the nature of poverty in the country.

Latest statistics indicate that Zambia's population currently stands at 11 million people. Poverty levels stand at 67%, with poverty incidences being higher in rural areas at about 80%. The health demographic survey carried out by the Central Statistical Office in Zambia in 2007 puts stunting in growth at 45% for children under the age of 5. The survey also indicated that 15% of children under 5 are under weight while 10% of the mothers had low body mass index (BMI). This illustrates the extent of nutritional challenges that the country faces. These challenges have been attributed to the rising levels of poverty in the country. Other factors include rising food and commodity prices, and the over reliance on production of few crop/food varieties, mainly carbohydrates such as maize, sorghum, cassava, millet and others. Poor preservation and utilization of food crops has also been noted as a challenge.

The high cost of agriculture inputs, coupled with challenges in the management of the government supported fertilize and input support programme, make agricultural production difficult for many rural communities. Another major problem relates to challenges of access to,

ownership and control of land, especially by women, who are the major producers of food in Zambia and in many other parts in Africa. This problem has been worsened by increasing land acquisition by foreign investors for mining, commercial agriculture predominantly for export, and for bio fuels – leading to displacement of communities and disruption of livelihoods. The result is that many families in Zambia live on one meal a day.

ActionAid Zambia’s practical experience in Food Security and Nutrition

ActionAid has thus worked to demonstrate how nutritional challenges can be addressed through its EU supported Project on the Reduction of Nutritional Vulnerability (PRUVEN) that focuses on improving the nutrition status of vulnerable groups in Zambia, particularly women and children and those affected by HIV and AIDS. The project aims to support households diversify food production; explore alternative ways of food storage and preservation to preserve nutritional value of foods. Assessments conducted prior to implementation of the PRUVEN in the target districts revealed that many households lived on one meal a day, usually consisting of Nshima (thick porridge made from maize, cassava, millet or sorghum and vegetables – normally dry and only eaten fresh when in season). Families usually grew only 1-3 types of food crops, and were very dependent on seasonal foods. Many did also not have any form of livestock, even small livestock common in rural communities such as goats, chickens and pigs and as such had very limited sources of protein.

Evaluation of the PRUVEN project after two years of implementation recorded phenomenal successes. Number and variety of meals improved significantly in the target areas, with many households growing up to 5 different food crops. The support provided by the project enabled beneficiaries to improve both farming and preservation practices. Communities were also taught different ways of preparing their regular food in a much more nutritious manner.

Bringing practice and policy to bear

- AAIZ has used experiences from implementing PRUVEN to feed into various policy discourses.
- AAIZ provided input in the development of the Food and Nutrition Policy and also development of agriculture chapter in the country’s Sixth National Development Plan 2011 – 2015. AAIZ supported Civil Society Organisation’s initiative to regularly monitor and assess proceedings of NCC, especially focusing on Economic and Social Rights.
- AAIZ continues to support and facilitate initiatives for Civil Society Organisation to critique the national constitution making process. To this end, AAIZ successfully organized a National Forum for CSOs country wide to review the draft constitution and make submissions on various clauses in the Constitution, but more importantly, push for consideration of the economic and social rights in the Bill of Rights, key among these the right to food, water and effective sanitation.

- There is currently an ongoing campaign to petition government on the right to food and AAIZ continues to support CSOs working on this. Various media communications have been undertaken to highlight flaws in the draft constitution and the constitution making process itself. AAIZ is also initiating efforts to draw international attention to the constitution making process realizing that this is not a challenge for Zambia alone, but for other countries in similar situations.
- AAIZ is also linking this work to work around women and land rights that aim to strengthen women's access to and control over land in order to increase agricultural productivity. Advocating for the enactment/review of comprehensive land administration policies, around large scale acquisition by international investors particularly for bio fuel production and mining activities is another way in which AAIZ is pushing for the right to food agenda.

What can the international community do to help?

There is definitely a role for countries in the North, particularly NGOs, to support countries like Zambia addressing the fundamental issue of the right to food. Many of the multi national companies that are engaged in massive land acquisitions, leading to displacements in many instances and undertake activities in developing countries that undermine food sovereignty of these countries are Northern based companies. NGOs and others can therefore play a critical role in holding these companies accountable for their actions in developing countries and pushing their governments to put in place legislation that protects developing countries from these powerful corporate.

Countries in the north can also support and build capacity for more local research into health, social and cultural aspects of food and nutrition in order to find local solutions that are culturally appropriate, sustainable and take into account economic and social realities of the country. For example, in many high maize consumption countries, the idea of 'yellow' maize meal is simply not acceptable – and so before a lot of money is invested in re-introducing this to countries, research into its acceptable and ways of building such acceptability needs to be undertaken.

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