



BNB Policy Brief

Zimbabwe Risks Losing the Gains Achieved in the Children Centered MDGs Targets

Introduction

Globally, there is an increasing need for African governments to accelerate their commitments in implementing policies and laws targeting to promote the socio economic rights of children. African countries including Zimbabwe are signatory to various international protocols on children. Some of these conventions include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDG agenda spells out certain benchmarks which need to be achieved in the poverty eradication, education, food and nutrition sectors. While there is pressure to fulfil the MDGs targets especially under the poverty eradication sector before the September 2015 deadline, efforts by the Zimbabwe government are being undermined by lack of supportive policy and legislation environment. The child development sector has emerged to be critical in addressing human development challenges in a sustainable manner. Zimbabwe has gone a milestone towards meeting children centred MDG targets such as promoting universal access to education. However, due to several other factors which include lagging in poverty eradication and formulation and implementation of developmental frameworks targeting children, Zimbabwe risks losing track on MDGs as the gains made so far are not sustainable. Poverty has emerged to be largely affecting the development of children and vulnerability is manifesting itself in hunger, nutritional deficiencies and child headed households. This Basic Needs Basket policy brief aims to increase awareness on some of the key concerns in the sector which need attention at both local and national level.

The Poverty Reduction Forum Trust (PRFT) used a participatory methodology to get a deeper understanding of the challenges being faced in the sector. Through its April Basic Needs Basket surveys conducted in Bindura, Masvingo, Mutare, Gweru and Shurugwi, PRFT has found that school going children especially those under five years are being exposed to deteriorating social service delivery. The surveys have revealed poor levels of social investment in education as a critical challenge that has undermined the success of children targeted programmes such as the Early Childhood Development (ECD) training. The government of Zimbabwe took a positive move to enhance child development through introducing compulsory ECD classes at primary level. However, the policy directive was not accompanied by increased government investment in the ECD to make sure that facilities required in the sector are adequate. Households who were consulted under PRFT's sentinel surveys in Masvingo and Bindura revealed that cheaper ECD government facilities are failing to accommodate the number of children requiring ECD training. As a result, households revealed that they are forced to send their children to private ECD facilities where they face fees which are above the ones charged by public schools. In Bindura and Masvingo urban areas, the survey findings show that on average, private schools offering ECD are charging \$66 and \$70 per term respectively. On the other side, the commonly found council primary schools and churches in the same towns are charging average term fees of \$55 and \$60 in Bindura and Masvingo, respectively. In Shurugwi, the government owned primary schools are charging an average amount of \$25 for ECD while private schools in the same town are charging ECD fees which range from \$75 to \$90 per term. The survey also shows that ECD affordability at government schools has not translated into a significant reduction in the household budget towards education as households are purchasing other school requirements and financing of construction of ECD infrastructure through levies.

The BNB surveys reflect that while orphans and vulnerable children in urban and peri urban areas have been receiving educational support from development organisations' social protection programmes, there is still poor coverage of the support given the growing number of the vulnerable children due to increasing urban household poverty. There is a real challenge as households have indicated that a lot of deserving children have not benefited from the government's Basic Educational Assistance Module (BEAM) support and this is compounded by lack of transparency and accountability in the management of the BEAM. PRFT notes that corruption has been fuelled by the lack of effective community

involvement in monitoring and evaluation of most of the social cash transfer programmes such as the BEAM project. Low levels of commitment by the government to produce timely progress reports and share them with the public has been cited to be one of the ingredients to poor public accountability. There is no information in the public domain to hold government accountable.

Evidence gathered from PRFT's social research tool on urban livelihoods clearly shows increasing child vulnerability due to household poverty which is linked to decreasing disposable income. There is a general reflection that households have been constrained not only by inability to pay school fees for their children but also inability to buy food required for child growth. For example, a product such as fresh milk has been revealed by households to be a luxury in household's expenditure plans. However, milk provides the calcium which is crucial for the stimulation of cognitive performance and prevention of diseases in children. Current UNAIDS statistics show that nutritional deficiencies continue to affect many children below five years, school going age and other populations. Hunger and malnutrition have a negative effect on children's educational completion rates and learning outcomes which are indicators of child development.

Policy Recommendations

- PRFT strongly recommends the government to accelerate its efforts to implement policies and legislation that support child development. As the country migrates into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing the needs of children and youth will be an integral component in achieving social outcomes. Particularly, the government should allow adequate investment in the Early Childhood Development education to make sure the necessary infrastructure is available and accessible. The government should put more emphasis on policies that address the accessibility of quality education indicators and it should go beyond just addressing school enrolment factors.
- The complementarity between ministries such as Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and Ministry of Health and Child welfare (MOHCW) should be strengthened to make sure that nutrition also becomes an integral component of social protection programmes targeting children.
- At local level, the local authorities and government departments should develop child sensitive plans in collaboration with citizens. For example, PRFT urges local authorities in Bindura, Masvingo and Shurugwi to work effectively with the Bindura Residents Association (BRA), Masvingo United Residents and Ratepayers Association (MURRA) and Shurugwi Residents Association (SHRA) in addressing barriers to access to children's basic needs such as education, health and quality nutrition. One critical requirement to optimise utilisation of local resources is for local authorities to derive specific data to support local planning of service delivery and children's needs. There must be a participatory approach to quantification of children's needs and the collection of monitoring and evaluation information data on children's education programs.
- The government should improve its coordinating role to make sure communities at grass roots level are involved and capacitated in monitoring and evaluation of the local plans and social protection programs targeting children. This will help to promote transparency and accountability and cushion the increasing vulnerability of children and other vulnerable groups in the urban areas. There is also need for the government to improve its communication on the progress of these plans and the monitored data should be produced and shared at both ward, district, provincial and national level.

- Above all, there is need to revitalize the economy so that parents and family members can be gainfully employed, earn an income above the poverty datum line and be able to fully provide for their children.
- The key ask for the Sustainable Development Goals framework is that no one should be left behind, and Zimbabwe's development thrust should not leave the future generation- the children, behind.