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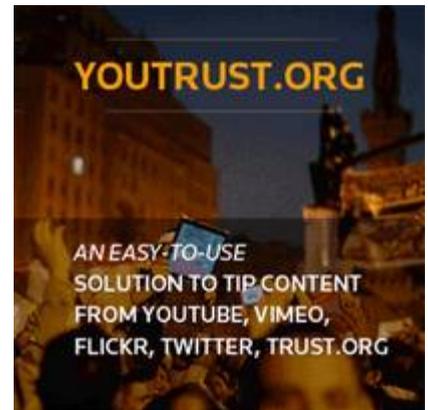
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Enough empty promises

05 Oct 2011 01:00
Source: [Member // ActionAid](#)

Pamela Chisanga is country director of ActionAid Zambia. From schools so old they threaten to collapse, to mining companies not paying their way, she explains some of the problems she deals with in the course of her work.

When I was growing up, we were taught that Zambia was a beautiful country endowed with immense natural resources, and that the government was working hard to ensure all Zambians had a decent standard of living. I don't actually remember the word poverty being used then. The aspiration was 'an egg a day for each Zambian', and we were hopeful it might happen.

Sadly the reality today is that poverty levels are extremely high - as much as 80% in rural areas and 60% in urban areas. Many people still do not have access to basic services such as health, education or safe drinking water. Zambia has very high unemployment levels - out of a population of about 13 million, less than 400,000 are in formal employment.

To many people, this picture is perhaps typical of so many poor countries. But it is only when you begin to work with extremely poor people that you realise statistics like these will never fully explain poverty and its impact, especially on women and children.

A clear focus

I joined ActionAid because I have always admired its clear focus on poverty and injustice, and I now understand what this really means. ActionAid in Zambia works with the poorest of the poor, such as those in Luano Valley where, 44 years after independence, the government still hasn't built a school. Children were learning in old, dilapidated structures put up by the Catholic church some years back. They often had to learn outside for fear of the school collapsing.

With the support of ActionAid, the community has been able to build a better school and good-quality teachers' houses. Local people worked hard to lobby the government to send more teachers to the area. Last year, the school recorded a higher progression rate from grade seven to grade eight, with a lot more girls qualifying - something that this community had never before experienced. There is now a lot of excitement (and competition!) as girls look forward to making it to grade eight.

As ActionAid, we recognise that it is not our responsibility to construct schools. But this had to be done for the community of Luano because everyone, including the government, thought it was impossible - the area is remote and often inaccessible, making construction efforts extremely difficult. Difficult but, as we were able to prove, not impossible.

A middle income country?

ActionAid Zambia has been actively engaging with the government to push for more resources to be channelled to areas like Luano Valley. Interestingly, Zambia was recently reclassified as a middle-income country, which to us confirms what we have always known - the country is generating huge revenues from vast mineral wealth such as gold, silver, emeralds and copper.

Yet what is shocking is that poverty levels continue to rise. So where is all this money going? I believe it can only be two places - corrupt government officials

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and others close to them, and the equally corrupt rich multinational companies who exploit our resources and then do everything they can to avoid paying any taxes to our government.

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Our country is highly dependent upon revenue from copper mining. But the Mopani mine, the second largest in Zambia, has been accused of tax dodging on a massive scale. Mopani is majority owned by Glencore, a controversial international commodities trading group that recently listed on the London stock exchange.

An audit report into Mopani was commissioned by the Zambian government - and was leaked to the press. Based on the leak, we worked out that the company's tax evading potentially cost our government up to £76 million a year. That's far more than the £59 million a year the UK government gives Zambia in aid.

This scandal is just one example of how much our people lose out, and shamefully, how poor communities are subject to high levels of pollution clearly visible in the areas around the mine. And yet officials do nothing but accept endless promises by Mopani to improve the situation in future. People in the meantime are living there, and their lives and health will not wait for these future plans.

Tax and investment

As ActionAid, we are proud that our engagement on this issue has been consistent and that we have pushed the government to backtrack, now asking companies like Mopani and others to pay more tax.

Our work now is to ensure that the government invests this money in critical areas such as education and supporting smallholder farmers, particularly women. This sounds easy and looks like a good ending for this story. Far from it! Sadly, corruption is widespread, our country is not fully democratised and, basically, it does not listen to its citizens.

Citizens, especially those in civil society organisations who push the government to make changes, are often persecuted or 'bought over' to silence them. People live in real fear, and getting them to work with us to challenge the government is no easy task. But it's one that ActionAid will continue to work on so that one day having an egg, or an apple, a day in Zambia is not the preserve of a handful of Zambians.

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