

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROBERT MUGABE NATIONAL YOUTH DAY

Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD) joins Zimbabwe to celebrate the National Youth Day today. The Robert Gabriel Mugabe National Youth Day was first recognized as a public holiday on the 24th of November 2017 through Statutory Instrument 143 of 2017.¹ As the nation celebrates the day, it is vital to examine the challenges encountered by Zimbabwean youth and determine how those challenges militate against the development aspirations articulated in the National Development Strategy (NDS) 1. Some of the challenges encountered by youth are presented hereunder:

Drug Abuse

- There is no general consensus to the number of youth involved in drugs, figures fluctuates between 57%² and 53.8%³ but what is clear is that over 50% of youth are victims of drug abuse.
- At the same time, the World Health Organizations' report titled Mental Health Among Young People in African Region states that, Zimbabwe has the highest number of 15 to 19-year-olds in Africa who engage in heavy “episodic drinking”, at 70.7% among males and 55.5%⁴ among females.
- The abuse of drugs by youth has undermined national human capital and they account for over 70% of mental health problems in the country.⁵

Youth Unemployment

- The youth accounts for over 80% of the Zimbabwean population yet there are the most marginalised and vulnerable group of the population.
- The 2022 First Quarter Labour Force Survey Report by the Zimbabwe National Statistic Agency (ZIMSTATs) concluded that 2.5 million youth between the age of 15 and 34 are unemployed.⁶ 1.5 million of the 2.5 million aged between 15 to 24 had a national expanded unemployment rate of 66% while the national expanded unemployment rate for youths aged between 15-34 years was 57%.⁷
- The report states that, rural areas accounted for 53% of the total unemployment rate while urban had 47%.
- The findings of the 2022 ZimVac Report are in alignment with ZIMSTAT findings as the report stated that, 83.1% of the youth listed employment as their major priority.

1. <https://www.herald.co.zw/feb-21st-now-public-holiday/>

2. Maraire, T., & Chethiyar, S. D. (2020). Drug and substance abuse problem by the Zimbabwean youth: A psychological perspective. *Practitioner Research*, 2, 41-59

3. The 2022 ZimVAC Rural Livelihoods Assessment Report

4. <https://www.youtube.com/redirect?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.who.int%2Finitiatives%2Fwho-special-initiative-for-mental-health>

5. Zimbabwe National Drug MasterPlan (2021-2025)

6. <https://bullszimbabwe.com/over-2-5-million-unemployed-youths-cause-for-concern/>

7. <https://www.africa-press.net/zimbabwe/all-news/over-2-5-million-zimbabwean-youths-jobless>

School Drop Outs

- The Government's allocation for education sector continues to fall short of the 20% Dakar Education of all benchmark. Education expenditure decreased from 16.5% in 2021 to 13.4% in 2022 and slightly increased to 14% in 2023.
- School dropouts is rife in Zimbabwe with over 840,000 children reportedly dropped out of school since the emergence of COVID-19.⁸
- In 2022, over 30,000 students failed to register for Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) exams. This is because examination fees, had gone beyond the reach of the majority.
- A UNICEF Zimbabwe Annual Report for 2021, 4.8 million children are in need of Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM).

Child labour

Allegations have been levelled against emerging sugarcane farmers in Chiredzi over the use of child labor in sugar cane plantations. On the 26th of April 2022, the Parliamentary Thematic Committee on Human Rights made a visit to Chiredzi, Mkwazini and discovered that approximately 300 children are working in sugar cane fields.

A report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in 2018 discovered that in tobacco producing regions, during the harvesting period there were significantly higher rates of truancy from school classes, suggesting that parents were depending on their children for help with the harvest.⁹

Absenteeism of primary and secondary school children has become the order of the day, making it difficult for students to keep up with their schoolwork.¹⁰ From a rights perspective, children rights are violated on two dimensions; first on child labour, second, their right to education¹¹.

Child Marriages

- Approximately, 34% of girls under the age of 18 married, while 5% of girls under the age of 15 are married.¹²
- The challenge of child marriage is not limited to the girl child only as approximately 2% of boys marry under the age of 18.
- Child marriage in Zimbabwe is fuelled by numerous challenges which among them include; poverty, religion, poor access to education, harmful social norms as well as legal gaps.
- Zimbabwe is among the 20 countries that have the highest prevalence of Child marriage.

8. <https://www.newsday.co.zw/local-news/article/4695/840-000-children-drop-out-of-school>

9. Human Rights Watch. 2018. A Bitter Harvest Child Labor and Human Rights Abuses on Tobacco Farms in Zimbabwe

10. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/8/zimbabwe-tobacco-farms-child-labour-abuse-rife-hrw-says>

11. <https://www.fairplanet.org/story/child-labour-in-zimbabwes-tobacco-and-gold-industries/>

12. UNICEF Data Updated February 2021

Trade Injustices

- Trade injustices across the entire economic sector have worsened the plight of youth. Youth who are engaged in small-scale farming and artisanal mining are relegated to the periphery of the agricultural and extractive value and supply chains.
- Consequentially, there are less paid while middle-men or corporates maximise on their vulnerability. A perfect example is that of contract farming in the agricultural sector i.e. in tobacco, sugar cane and cotton which has facilitated the exploitation of youth and debt contraction which has left youth more impoverished.
- The larger share of the 1.5 million artisanal miners are youth yet the government has not yet legally recognised them. This perpetuates social and economic injustices among the youth.

Fiscal Injustices

- Poor Public Finance Management (PFM), poor Public Resource Management (PRM), debt distress, resource leakages and Illicit Financial Flows (IFF) have militated against effective fiscal justice which is a vital cog for national development and growth.
- Corruption, tenderpreneurship and opaque mega deals as well as infrastructure development projects have facilitated the looting of public funds. The resources that could have been used to capacitate the Ministry of Youth are now being channelled to the hands of the few.
- The same applies to resources that could have been used to refurbish rehabilitation centres, vocational training centres, health infrastructure and job creation. Therefore, it is critical that while addressing the plight of the youth, the government must give special attention to prudent public finance management.

Policy Proposals

To ensure that the Robert Gabriel Mugabe National Youth Day does not remain a political rhetoric but becomes meaningful by capturing lived realities of young people while resonating with the concerns and aspirations of the youth, ZIMCodd proffers the following policy proposals:

- The Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare in conjunction with the Ministry of Home Affairs must plug out all high-profile drug smugglers.
- The Ministry of Finance and Economic Development must allocate sufficient resources to the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare to refurbish existing rehabilitation centres and vocational training centres and build new ones.

- Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Services must investigate all allegations of child labour and ensure that perpetrator faces the full wrath of the law.
- The government must prioritise job creation for young people in line with targets set in the NDS1.
- Trade policies must be empowering, inclusive and biased towards youth and women.
- The Ministry of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Services must ensure that, the fight against child marriage goes beyond political rhetoric.
- Fiscal discipline and prudent public resource management must be at the core of government programmes and initiatives.
- The Ministry of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs and the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission must plug out impunity by arresting and prosecuting at least one high profile figure.
- Robust social protection measures must be put in place to safe guard children against school dropout.
- The Ministry of Agriculture, Water, Climate and Rural Resettlement should prioritize youth in land distribution to empower youth economically.