

PEOPLE KNOW WHAT THEY NEED.

AN INTERVIEW WITH WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN ZAMBIA

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The eight Millennium Development Goals agreed upon at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 approached their deadline in 2015. They focused on reducing extreme poverty and hunger in the world as well as building foundations for social development by providing primary education, basic health care or employment to the global poor. Although they provided some tools to combat human suffering, the MDGs were also criticized for being disembedded from local activities and lacking strong objectives and analytical power. These shortcomings were to be overcome in the new post-2015 development agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs were adopted in September 2015 at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit. The SDGs are ambitious goals to eliminate extreme poverty and hunger altogether, providing everyone with quality education, health care, clean water, decent work and access to sustainable energy. They also focus on gender equality and reducing global inequalities among countries. Moreover, they also endorse the commitment to sustainable development by changing industry, production and consumption patterns, combating climate change and deterioration of life in oceans, desertification and deforestation, and promoting world peace and global partnership. How these goals will be implemented is another challenge. Despite their ambition, concrete results are to be measured by fragmented and controversial indicators. Another contestation centres on the power of the private sector which was inscribed into the very logic of the SDGs.

In March 2014 we talked with women representatives of women's and anti-poverty organisations in Lusaka, Zambia, about the contemporary development cooperation framework, the previous era of the MDGs as well as the upcoming challenges. Zambia is a country rich in resources and yet there is a lot of poverty, a country with progressive past and uncertain future in today's unjust global economic and political arrangement.

Zuzana Uhde: The Millennium Development Goals approach their deadline in 2015. It was clear that not all the goals would be fulfilled. How do you look back at the framework of the MDGs and development cooperation today?

Emily Joy Sikazwe: The women's movement in Zambia was disappointed that the Millennium Development Goals

diluted the Beijing Platform for Action, which we think was stronger. And we felt that the men in the United Nations and countries that they represent have hijacked the women's agenda because they felt the Beijing Platform for Action was militant. If you compare the Beijing Platform for Action and the MDGs, the first was very clear, the latter is wishy-washy. That's why it is important to bring it back on the agenda.

I think our position was vindicated. Talking about the MDGs in Zambia and their implementation, we issued a Social Watch report in which we show that Zambia was unlikely to meet the MDGs, except maybe one or two: education and maybe health to some extent. And this is only because the international community was focusing on those two, not because Zambia invested a lot of money in them.

Priscilla Chileshe: I agree. Moreover, these two MDGs are really not a threat to patriarchy, that's why they are accepted. But there are other goals that challenge the status quo. Especially the MDG 3 on gender equality in which we saw a minimum achievement. It remains a battlefield. The African Ministers of Gender stated that the goal of gender equality has not yet been addressed across Africa. And for that reason, they pushed for a stand-alone goal on gender equality in the post-2015 agenda. For us a lot of things have not been resolved. The fundamental issue is that politically correct things will not do what needs to be done.

Diana Ngula: Firstly, I want to say that the MDGs were not consulted with people at grassroot levels and their implementation was not well connected with the needs of communities. The way the budgets are planned needs to be consulted with people at grassroot levels; we need to ask them if what the community needs is to address water supplies or money transfers to vulnerable groups etc. There should be some form of consultation how the public budget should be allocated. For example, in areas such as social protection we do a lot of monitoring but then people have to wait how the funds will be allocated, they never really sit in the committee to decide what the community needs.

The important goal was to address poverty. But I think this issue demonstrated that our government did not show the political will. And we all know very well that the goal

of halving the number of people living in poverty won't be met. The poverty level is still very high. If we compare the indicators for 2006, 2010 and 2014, the poverty level is reduced 0.5, zero or 1.5 percentage points respectively. It's nothing. It looks like it's really a long way only to halve the poverty level in Zambia.

Juliet Kalaluka: I think the problem lies in our concept of governance – we elect a few people to run state affairs and we have no say until 5 years later. To include people in decision-making is an important challenge for us. The old model was that the government is the authority you don't question. But people start to contest this, the government has the responsibility to *us* as citizens.

Emily Joy Sikazwe: I would like to add that the European Union and other cooperating partners are not doing Africa a favour by insisting on economic growth at the expense of social empowerment of people and their own development. They know very well that our governments are weak and our governments are going to obey at the expense of having a dialogue with their own people. Before China came on the scene, the EU and the USA enforced conditionalities on aid. But then the African governments said we could turn to China for money. And the EU and USA have lost the power edge. The weaker the government is, the better for the EU and USA and their businesses.

We are not blind to that. We say poverty wears a woman's face. We are concerned as the women's movement about what is happening in our countries. Women are dying; maternal mortality rates are very high. Our children are poorly nourished. There is unemployment. Our children get a school degree but they can't get a job. The farmers are just slaves on their own farms. The prices for agriculture products are very low. It is the 21st century and people don't have drinking water. They share water with frogs and snakes and cows. They lack proper housing, people share one room and they sleep in turns with their children. So if you want to make love with your husband you chase your children to go to the street where they get raped because you want to have privacy. But there's no space for privacy in one room. So these are some of the issues that concern us. We need social protection in terms of social and economic rights which would hold our governments responsible.

The EU keeps giving money but we don't see this aid trickling down. The EU is also fond of giving business to their companies here at the expense of labour laws, at the expense of women. They don't insist that their companies respect laws and promote gender equality. The EU gives grants of 250,000 US dollars plus to white commercial farmers. And where is the share for women? If they give any of that money to women, these are women who are friends of the ruling government or their own personal friends because they've worked in Zambia before and so they know them – I can give you the names of these women. What

about grassroots women? What about the cooperatives that women establish? What about clubs women have? They do a lot with very little money. Ministers' wives and businessmen's wives receive money to grow roses instead of food.

So that brings the question in whose interest they are acting. It applies not just to the EU but also to the USA. What are their interests? If only they were fair in terms of trade, we should be able to get something from our agriculture. They say they promote development but really that's not the issue. We are poor because of these relationships with the EU and the USA. They challenge local governments only if it is in their self-interest. It is almost like collusion with those people who have the resources that we should all share.

Priscilla Chileshe: And if we ask: Where do our resources go? Where do our African leaders keep their money? It is in Europe.

For example, the war in Kongo sees no end. Because of those interests. But women are paying the ultimate price – they are raped, they are killed, they are made to send their children as child soldiers and we are watching.

Tomáš Tožička: What is the major problem in the way how money intended for development cooperation is distributed?

Emily Joy Sikazwe: Firstly, the Paris Declaration¹ killed the spirit of civil society because now the money is allocated to *projects* not programs. And when you bring money as projects not programs, you are saying: robots do those projects. There's no money for administrative support. And I saw the declining critical mass in Zambia in terms of civil society work. Secondly, after the Paris Declaration the EU and the USA have brought their own NGOs here to compete with us on the ground. Norwegian Church Aid, Danish Church Aid, Christian Aid, Swedish Save the Children and other US organizations. They only came after the Paris Declaration; they were not in Zambia before. Before, we received money directly from embassies. But they said they cannot monitor activities and read our reports. So now we are slave labourers for big international NGOs. We write proposals in conjunction with big international NGOs and they get the funding, they subcontract us to work in our own communities. We are only sub-contracted. And this subcontracting also means that they get the bulk of money. They don't show us what their salaries are. We don't have a voice. International NGOs submit proposals for consideration to the EU and they subcontract local organizations. What about small NGOs working in local communities? The applications are so complicated. We can't have paid consultants to write proposals. But we are not illiterate, we know what to do and how we want to do it and what we want to achieve.

This is the double standard and the hypocrisy. They get 5

million dollars, the local NGO gets 250 000, out of 5 million dollars. Why talk about transparency and accountability? They assume black people steal. And because of this assumption, they cannot trust us with money. But Africans learned corruption from Europeans. We didn't know it before colonization. We had a barter system here so we didn't know money. I am not saying there's no corruption in Africa. But I say before you corrupt there is a corruptor. With whom did the local governments make corrupted deals?

Priscilla Chileshe: We must address structural causes of inequality and political and economic underpinnings of how development is pursued. Our European counterparts give us money so they also tell us what to do. When we are upset about this cooperation, we tell them what about the foreign interest which pays your salaries.

For Zambia one of the priorities is fighting against poverty. What can you do for families that care for children with no parents because of HIV/AIDS. Grandparents take care for 10 children. At least the Catholic Church is distributing food. Otherwise there are families where half of the members eat on Monday and then on Tuesday they fast so that the other half can eat. And the ones who ate on Tuesday cannot eat on Wednesday. That is the reality for many Zambians.

Juliet Kalaluka: Society for Women with AIDS distributes family support in these communities. Without that children have nothing to eat. When they are starving how can they perform at school? This is poverty.

Priscilla Chileshe: A lot of schools have feeding programs because they found children are not able to continue the school because they were hungry. So children can come to school and at least they eat something. I think the number of people in poverty is much higher than what the official statistics show.

Zuzana Uhde: If you look at the development over the past couple years, what do you think was successful in terms of fighting against poverty and what was left unanswered?

Priscilla Chileshe: Zambia is not an island. We face consequences of liberalization and privatization as elsewhere. In 1991 we changed from a one-party state system to a multiparty system and we introduced liberalization and privatization. Along with that we saw a lot of companies closed down. So a lot people on whose salaries many others depended were suddenly without jobs. Before, we had services for free. You could go for treatment to the hospital for free; you could send your children to school for free. At the same moment when jobs started disappearing, public services became paid. So it was a very difficult period. And also it placed the burden especially

on women. They are the ones making sure their families survive, growing tomatoes, selling something on the market, anything. And women are the ones who are in debt. I overheard one conversation: "We were aircraft engineers in one minute and in the next minute there were no jobs." I don't know how many people died because of that sudden situation. It was too much to bear.

Emily Joy Sikazwe: It also brought about gender imbalance. Women keep families together. Men are frustrated without jobs.

The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) forced down on this country contributed a lot to the increasing level of poverty. The UN was present in Zambia at that time and they knew the SAPs are bad. G8 together with the World Bank and the IMF ignored the African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes (AAF-SAP)² agreed upon in the 1980s in Abuja. The SAPs killed industries, killed the human resources that Zambia had been investing into since 1964 by educating people. People are now dying because of poor nutrition, HIV/AIDS. So how can you reduce poverty if you lose half of the skilled population?

And for what industries can you educate people? For mining where our people who were engineers in the same mining company are now snipers?

Diana Ngula: The government introduced some measures to reduce poverty. For example it increased the level of income which is tax free. But people who earn just little above that pay high taxes. Food and water prices increased. The cost of having a small business is very high. At the same time, many mining companies and other investors (i.e. Zambia sugar) are diverting taxes. Mining companies make huge profits but the provinces they are located in are in horrible state. The corporate social responsibility doesn't work. So you can say that the government has tried to reduce poverty but it has not much of an impact. The greatest impact would be if we introduced the windfall tax on mining, if we strengthened the tax collection on big business, if we ended tax evasions. Corporations cannot just come, completely rape the land and leave people in poverty.

Emily Joy Sikazwe: Another problem is the sustainability of newly built infrastructures. It is not enough to build hospitals in rural areas. The communities need money to run them. Today, you see that rural hospitals lack basic drugs, they are understaffed, sometimes there are no doctors, only nurses.

Diana Ngula: The same applies to education. The enrolment rates are rising but the schools do not have capacities to teach all these children. There are classes in the Eastern province with 128 pupils in one class. They don't

even have a chair to sit on. Sometimes it's really shocking. One teacher was supposed to teach all grades – one, two, three and four. But she cannot divide herself so she put them in one classroom and taught them successively. You can imagine the concentration of these children. And you can see the stress the teacher faces. You can see the quality of education that those pupils get. It is a good thing that children go to school. But this is not the kind of education we want at the end of the day. They have no books. And sometimes when it rains and the road is bad they can't even go to school.

Priscilla Chileshe: Community schools which are self-organized by parents and locals because there are no public schools in the area are sometimes better than government schools. Children in community schools are doing better than those in government schools. So it speaks a lot about the quality of education. Government has introduced a policy of taking over community schools as Government responsibility.

Juliet Kalaluka: In rural areas a lot of talented children cannot continue to study. We are losing a lot of talents. It's NGOs who are supporting these children and struggling to provide education for them, not the government.

And family planning. People have a lot of children; it is very difficult to provide for them. If the government expands family planning programs to reach also communities in remote areas and to educate women and their husbands about family planning, it would help to reduce child mortality.

Emily Joy Sikazwe: This would help only few. Without health care others would still continue dying. If you talk about family planning, women look at you as if you are not normal. They say: "If I have four children, three are likely to die. So if you assure me that my four children will live, I don't need to keep on getting pregnant. Do you think I like to walk long distances to deliver a baby? Do you think I don't know that dirty water, bad nutrition, diarrhoea get children sick?" That is the problem with family planning, people are so down. They think you are not normal telling them to have fewer children because nobody can guarantee them they will survive.

Zuzana Uhde: All these challenges – poverty, lack of infrastructure, education in schools in remote areas, gender inequality – how do you think we can address them successfully?

Priscilla Chileshe: We need to strengthen people's participation in the whole system. That is the key. Somebody must ask questions and hold the authorities accountable. Zambia has been talking about decentralization but it is not implemented. And we need the NGOs' input to make sure people are invited to participate and ask questions,

such as why there are no books in schools, why hospitals have no drugs, where are fertilizers for farmers when the government provided money to buy them? We need more transparency and openness.

Emily Joy Sikazwe: However, I have a problem with this issue of transparency and accountability. It is presupposed that accountability is about money. But it is not. It's about actions for the people in poverty. We need to devolve power. And that is the key. Central government has no business in budgeting for people in local communities; the budgets must come from them and their needs. Decentralization and devolution of power could contribute towards eradication of poverty. We need to focus on structural causes of inequalities that cause poverty.

Zambia has been talking about decentralization for very long time. The Irish, the British are putting a lot of money into this. That decentralization hasn't worked because the government is afraid of devolution of power.

Zuzana Uhde: During the negotiation of the post-2015 agenda the focus has been on public private partnership (PPP) as a new approach of achieving sustainable development goals. What do you think about this focus of the development cooperation?

Emily Joy Sikazwe: It is laughable. The Capital does not feel sorry for the poor. The owners and managers do everything for profit. When they talk about PPP, it is really about the interest of the Capital which feels threatened that the communities will riot and they lose their profit. So to keep people calm, they give some small change to communities and villages. In the name of PPP people will get some crumbs.

Priscilla Chileshe: Actually, we have a very good example of how this works from the past. The copper mining companies. They make sure miners' families are busy. They had youth training programs, women's clubs for miners' wives. But they have no possibilities to move forward with their lives. They have no possibilities for emancipation. If a miner loses a job, his family is worse off than people in rural areas. So this is really only window dressing. And there are many other examples of these private initiatives for the poor. Why should it be different this time? The interest of the private companies is their profit, what they can get for themselves. This is our experience.

Emily Joy Sikazwe: And again, these concepts are coming from the USA and Europe, the Bretton Woods institutions. They impose them on us, and our governments implement them. I don't need to be an economist to understand that is a bad premise. How can it work? This is the way these companies operate. How can our grand/parents in the village negotiate with these companies? We can see through them.

Zuzana Uhde: This leads us to future priorities. What do you think should be the priorities both at national and global level for social development and how should they be articulated in order to eliminate poverty?

Emily Joy Sikazwe: I think for Zambia the priority is to have a new constitution. Once the new constitution is in place, the goal is going to be to make it popular. Most of our problems stem from the fact that the governance system is not clear; too much power is vested in individuals. That is the legacy of the colonial system. I think this is the starting point. Since 1964 the women's movement has been demanding a new constitution that would give women equal rights. And we want to have social and economic rights that protect the poor.

There are other points which we think need to be addressed at the international level. The EU and USA are pushing how we should govern ourselves. But the goal of the UN is to help all our governments to govern properly. It seems to me that those who have big money have more power. I don't think that local consultations on the post-2015 agenda are seriously taking place. Those who are preparing the post-2015 agenda are still using the same old approach. They are not really hearing what people are saying. And we think that should change.

We also need to talk about land issues. Land is being grabbed in Zambia by Europeans, Americans, and Chinese at the expense of our people. In Zambia only 6% of the land belongs to the government, the rest of the land belongs to people. Nobody should sell it. It belongs to our ancestors, to people living today and to those who are unborn yet. That land is priceless. Today the land is given away to big companies at the expense of women, at the expense of youth and everybody else. If there's going to be a war in Africa, it is going to be over the land. This is an issue that we seriously need to address.

Josephine Bwalya Muchelemba: Let me go back to the post-2015 agenda. I think it needs to be centred on citizen-led development. I think we will need to find a way to protect people at all levels, from other individuals, from their own government and from actors in the international and transnational arena who collide with them. This issue of land is just one example. The challenge is governance. Too much power is vested in authorities. We need to find a way in which people can make demands.

The globalization opens other issues. For example, fair terms of trade. We would not need foreign aid if there were fair terms of trade. Africa is not a poor continent. Zambia is a rich country. We must be able to use our resources for the benefit of all Zambians. This should be the goal for the post-2015 agenda. On a personal level I ask myself why I must write an essay just to get a visa to Great Britain. I don't even want to spend a week there. When they come here it is all easy.

Priscilla Chileshe: I think Africa is crying for leadership that is not self-interested but centred on the interests of people. This is what is lacking. We want leaders who have passion for the development of their own people, for the development of their land.

For me, gender equality is the priority in the post-2015 agenda. Women make up more than 51% of this country's population. And if we are serious about the development of Zambia, it must be about gender equality. We need to unlock the potential that rests in women, they are held back.

Zuzana Uhde: What do you think communities need for developing their capacities for living dignified life and for their social development?

Emily Joy Sikazwe: As we said, it needs to be a people-centred development, which means that people have to know what is happening, why it is happening and what they can do about it by themselves. What will be the effects on their lives. They have their rich experience, they know their environment, they know their land. I think we need to build their capacity to exploit the assets they already have. They can tell you the rainfall pattern has changed so we need to plant at this time and not another. We are disempowering them because we think we know it all and they don't. So our approach should be to start from where they are to build their capacity to be more resilient. If they need the training, we give them the necessary training. But we need to listen to them.

Priscilla Chileshe: I completely agree. People have the answers. Our role is only to steer them. To help them realise what they already have. They have a lot of experience. For me number one is to help them build their resilience. We can provide information, help to build capacities and just sit and see how well they're doing and see how their own piece fits into the puzzle.

Emily Joy Sikazwe: People can do informed choices if they have enough information. We taught them that working together is better than to work isolated. And they did. And it works. They are working in solidarity among themselves because they understand the issues, they form cooperatives and clubs. If you went to any area where these associations work and ask them what their basic rights are, they talk about water, health, education, food, security, shelter. And if you ask them what they want to see in the constitution, they will mention the same things. The government should put this in the legal language and put it in the constitution. They can tell that their children are walking 10 kilometres to school, barefoot on a hungry stomach and that's why their capacity to absorb what the teacher is saying is very limited. They understand that. They see that women in labour are put on a sledge. There is no road, there is no car,

there's no bicycle. When the labour is difficult, they cannot handle it in the village. They're pulling her on a sledge for 60 kilometres and she dies on the way. So they understand that. How can one say they don't understand the right to healthcare or the right to education?

Diana Ngula: You need to give people information, you need to show them the structure in which they can participate when it comes to the budget or their social and economic rights and they can begin to advocate for themselves. We need to mediate the discussion between communities and public service providers. They ask why our children drink water from a fish pond at school. Why is there no borehole? And we see that after that the borehole is done. They ask why there is only one bed in the maternity ward in the rural hospital. Women are dying on the way and if they make it to the hospital they could not be admitted because there was no available bed. We saw the maternity ward was expanded to accommodate more than 10 women now. Once you give people information and you facilitate a platform where they can ask questions why certain things are going the way they are, then they are able to engage. But when they don't know that they can question something, nothing will happen. Service providers know what is needed but only after you follow them and ask them where the money is, you begin to see the results.

Tomáš Tožička: Emily mentioned cooperatives as a good way of engaging people. How is it with cooperative development and support in Zambia?

Emily Joy Sikazwe: I think cooperatives are the best way. Woman in most places organize clubs and other groups. Those are, in fact, cooperatives. Some of them are registered, others not. These are seed growing cooperatives, cargo cooperatives, and other. In Zambia villages are far from each other, information doesn't flow very much, people are isolated. Government structures do not reach remote rural communities. People need cooperation to survive. If they work together, they have more muscle, they have more information that they can share and generate new ideas. The cooperatives work very well. Africans work in a cooperative world and we must build on this culture to make sure that people develop socially and economically together.

There is a strong history of cooperatives in our country. But with the change in government in 1991 and the shift to economic liberalization, the new government killed the cooperatives. They used to be strong, now they are weak. The Eastern province cooperative unions, the Southern province cooperative unions and also the Central province cooperative unions were the biggest and they had a political voice also at the international level, such as the UNEP Convention.

Priscilla Chileshe: It is true; we had a long history of cooperatives movement in this country. And we also found

that there is a space for women, women are founding women's clubs. However, the state support for farmers in the form of fertilizer goes through cooperatives. But only through registered cooperatives. A lot of women then don't have access to it. This is what we need to change. Women's clubs have to have access to farmer input support. Some studies we did in the Eastern province and the Southern province show women were excluded or have traditional roles as secretaries. We also need to address the traditional mindset that men always need to have a higher position. We have some cooperatives benefit but one group is disadvantaged. Zambian women and men should equally benefit from the resources of the country.

Zuzana Uhde: Do you think the concept of ubuntu can be an inspiring way of development which is not enforced from outside but comes from within.

Priscilla Chileshe: That has been the bedrock of the African way of life. It means "I'm because we are". This idea has always been there and Kenneth Kaunda (the first president of Zambia) in his own way really developed this into humanism. We all protect each other.

Emily Joy Sikazwe: Ubuntu means social protection. If I die today, there is always someone to protect my children. No orphanages. Traditionally there is a concept of killing the selfishness inside. And also it is built on the fact that we all have something to give. You must be concerned about what's happening around you and take care not only about your family but also about other people around. It is an important concept but it's weakening. However, it is not completely gone.

Priscilla Chileshe: In Church communities, there is help with funerals, for the sick, the poor, the orphans. This is the cooperative spirit where you learn to care for each other. This is something which we can build on. Not economic but social cooperative. The church is run basically by women, they do all these things and the priest supports them. But something went wrong. Practically people are overburdened and they cannot help each other. If you are a widow with ten children you cannot help your sister. But this is individualistic and this is where corruption and indifference come from because you focus on yourself, what you can get at the expense of others, and you don't hear somebody is crying for help. We have learned these vices but we can unlearn them.

Josephine Bwalya Muchelemba: Ubuntu is our way of life. This is the way we do it. Children used to call their mother's sister mother. So if their mother dies, they have more mothers and fathers. But it is changing. The concept of ubuntu is known in the international arena because of Mandela.

Zuzana Uhde, Tomáš Tožička

Notes

1 *The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness*. 2005. Available from <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/34428351.pdf>

2 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. 1990. *African alternative framework to structural adjustment programmes for socio-economic recovery and transformation (AAF-SAP)*. Addis Ababa: UN. Available from <http://repository.uneca.org/handle/10855/5670>

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