Zambia needs significant policy reforms to accelerate human development

By Gibson Masumbu

The writing is on the wall. Zambia will not realize all the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) targets by 2015. The 2013 Progress Report for Zambia published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) shows that progress has been made over the years but there is still a long way to go to meet the basic minimum conditions required for a decent life for the majority of the people.

Zambia has made notable advancement on some of the MDGs targets. The prevalence of underweight children has been reduced to 13.3% from 25% in 1991, a baseline year for the MDGs targets. The HIV/AIDS prevalence among male and female adults is 14%, two percentage points below the 2015 target of 16%. Additionally, 79% of the people infected with HIV/AIDS virus are now accessing anti-retroviral drugs against a 2015 target of 80%. In 1991, the ratio of girls to boys in primary school was 0.98, meaning that more boys than girls had access to education. This has reduced to 0.99 and falls within range of the 2015 target of equal access.

While some progress has been made in some areas, in others, the gains have not been good enough to make significant improvements on the well-being of the people.

The proportion of people leaving in extreme poverty, for example, has only been reduced by a third from 58% in 1991 to 42% currently. The target for 2015 is 29%. Infant, under-five and maternal mortality rates are some of the areas where progress has been slow and are beyond reach of the 2015 targets. Others are provision of clean water and sanitation and proportion of women represented in parliament. There has also been failure in containing new cases of malaria which increased from 225 per 1000 people in 1991 to 330 cases per 1000 people in 2010. The 2015 target is 225 cases.

The questions to ask, therefore, is what does the failure to achieve the MDGs mean to an average Zambian? What are the consequences of the slow progress in meeting some of the MDGs targets?

The answers lie in yet another report published by the UNDP called
the 2013 Human Development Report (HDR). The report measures the long-term progress in the quality of life of people across the world. It shows that despite strong progress in human development across the world, Zambia’s advancement has been slow. The HDR shows that the gains mentioned above notwithstanding, the country still lag far behind in human development. Zambia is among the countries with very low human development attainment. In 2012, Zambia was ranked 163 out of 187 countries.

To put it all in perspective, Zambia’s lack of progress in the provision of better health services means that people will not be able to live a long and healthy life. In Zambia, a child born today is only expected to live for 49 years. If the same child was to be born in a country with very high Human Development (HD), it will have 31 years added to its life. The life expectancy rate in Zambia is the lowest in the SADC region. This is worsened by the high infant, under-five and maternal mortality rates. Infant and under-five mortality rates in Zambia are 76 and 138 deaths per 1000 live births compared to 5 and 6 in countries with very high HD. For maternal mortality, 483 mothers die per 100,000 live births in Zambia compared to only 15 in very high HD countries.

While Zambia has made some progress towards achieving its MDGs targets on education. The country can only manage to educate children up to grade seven. The average number of years of schooling for children in Zambia is seven years. If a child of school entrance age starts school today, the furthest she can go beyond grade 7 is grade 9. Even the few who reach grade 9 and 12, the pass rates are low. This state of affairs has adverse implications on the creation of a trainable and skillful workforce and therefore the development path of the country.

Zambian’s human development status is low in many other dimensions. These include youth employment, incidence of child labour, access to electricity and sanitation and homicide rates. All these put together, signify that the well-being of the majority of people in Zambia is undermined.

With the post-2015 development agenda discussions gaining momentum, policy makers and indeed other stakeholders should critically look at this situation and begin to think of how best to shape policies to reverse the obtaining situation. The 2013 HDR and MDGs Progress Review serve as important signals for areas that require significant policy reforms and investments. Policy reforms and investment are needed in order to accelerate and widen progress in human development.

Zambia can begin by learning from bold reforms it has undertaken particularly relating to HIV/AIDS scourge. In the 1990s, Zambia had one of the most devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic. The number of infections was growing rapidly. In
2000, HIV/AIDS prevalence among adults reached 16%. Government undertook bold reforms and investment in the area. In 2004, Government declared HIV/AIDS a national emergency and undertook to provide free Antiretroviral (ARV) drugs. Today 79% of people living with HIV/AIDS are receiving treatment. Other interventions include the expansion of the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMCT) initiatives and HIV testing, among others. With these interventions, Zambia has managed to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS. The country has already met its MDGs target of reducing prevalence rate to below 15%. This achievement, however, should not be a comfort zone but a reminder to the country to adequately invest in the provision of health service to reverse the current low state of human development.

Additionally, there are a number of other key policy actions that should be undertaken to improve the lives of people in the country. One of such actions is the need to revisit resource allocation in the budget. Zambia spends 3.6% of its GDP on health compared to 8% in very high HD countries. The country also spends only 1.3% of GDP on education compared to 5% in very high HD countries. What is surprising is that Zambia spends 1.7% of its GDP on the military which is more than it does on education. In the SADC region, for example, Zambia is one of the few countries where the Government spends more on the military than education. A phenomenon that perhaps needs checking considering that the country has not been at war since independence.

The quality of life for many of the people in rural areas will improve if their income increases over time. This will be done by creating more opportunities for employment and markets for those who are involved in business. In the 2013 budget speech, the Government set targets for job creation in the agriculture, manufacturing and tourism sectors.

In tourism, for example, Government is targeting to create 300,000 jobs. This milestone will only be achieved if measures are put in place to increase tourist arrivals in the country. Currently, Zambia receives 815,000 nonresident visitors who include tourists, overnight visitors and same-day visitors. Zimbabwe which shares the famous Victoria Falls with Zambia records almost three times that number at 2.2 million visitors. South Africa and Botswana have 8 million and 2.1 million visitors per annum, respectively. Zambia will need to increase its investment into the tourism sector to make the country a very attractive destination to equal the levels of Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa.

Indeed, Zambia has been experiencing robust economic growth in the past decade. The country has seen a rise in the inflow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), reduction of inflation to single digit, and attaining positive trade balance, among other achievements. In 2012, Zambia’s Gross National Income
(GNI) per capita was US$1,358 which makes the country qualify as a lower-middle income country.

What is still missing in the equation is a link between human development and growth. Most countries with very high GNI rank highly on the human development index suggesting that these countries have managed to effectively convert economic prosperity into human capabilities. This position is noteworthy for countries like Zambia that are yet to convert high economic growth into better lives for its people. High growth rates will only be meaningful if translated into improving the well-being of the people. People should begin to see the quality of their lives improving in terms of better health services, more access to education and indeed, more opportunities for jobs. This should be the cornerstone of the post-2015 development agenda.

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