

ENERGY CRISIS AND POVERTY IN ZAMBIA

Peter Henriot

Are young Zambian university students really committed to using the wisdom, knowledge and skills they have acquired to help reduce the poverty in the country? That is the challenge raised last week by the Vice Chancellor the University of Zambia during the pomp and fun of graduation ceremonies. It's a challenge well-worth examining by all of us.

What would it mean in Zambia today, if the majority of the recent graduates of UNZA and our other tertiary institutions were truly nationalists and patriots enough to use their unique privileges of learning to deal with the impoverishment of the majority of their sisters and brothers? Would we have a situation different than what we currently face, in areas of education, health, agriculture, employment, environment, investment, governance?

Let me just take up one issue, the issue of energy, since it has been much in the news lately. And let me take it up quickly, before ZESCO imposes another load shedding on the JCTR office and I won't be able to finish my column and e-mail it to THE POST in time for the Tuesday morning edition!

ENERGY CRISIS?

The first thing to face about energy is the very obvious point that Zambia is at a crisis point that needs very serious attention. We aren't generating enough electrical energy to meet all the domestic and industrial needs. This is especially sad in a country where less than 20% of the households are electrified and hence are exercising a great impact on deforestation through their demand for charcoal. And we are also experiencing the consequences of the dramatically rising global costs of oil, impacting directly on food costs.

ZESCO is certainly looking at a two-fold challenge to its reliability and credibility. Failure to plan ahead in time for the increased demand for electricity – e.g., poor maintenance of equipment, lack of investment in new equipment – leaves both households and businesses to deal with the disturbing and destabilising situations of load shedding. A significant increase of tariffs, something called for by management and recently echoed by high government officials, might mean more money for the parastatal but we should all ask about how it will be spent.

The recent Auditor General's report on ZESCO's finances certainly raises very disturbing questions about spending patterns. Whether management can satisfactorily answer all these questions – e.g., about huge Christmas bonuses and lavish spending habits – remains to be seen. The parastatal's management is certainly "innocent until proven guilty" but it had better be quickly forthcoming if it expects to keep the confidence of the public.

And of course if tariffs are to be increased, will this mean another strong hit at domestic households already burdened with high expenses or will industries such as the mines be asked to bear a much higher proportion of the costs? This is a major question of equity and fairness and should have a much higher place in conversations by management and government than it currently enjoys!

What about alternative energy sources for electricity? Why aren't government and the private sector talking more about alternatives? Solar energy surely has great potential in our usually bright Zambian climate. Yes, it is expensive to start up, but it certainly has a better

price structure in the long run. The same can be said for wind generation, an inexpensive and safe electrical producer.

NO TO NUCLEAR!

During a public-private meeting last week in Lusaka on future possibilities for Zambia, I was very disturbed to hear suggestions that we consider nuclear power as a way of meeting electrical needs in this country – especially since we might have sufficient local uranium deposits. But how serious is such a suggestion? And should it be taken seriously, in the light of increasing evidence that nuclear power is literally a dead-end for sustainable and integral human development?

Let me honestly admit that I'm no expert on this topic, but I have read enough to ask some challenging questions about the proposal that Zambia should pursue a nuclear power answer to our energy needs. A recent report in the respected weekly journal AMERICA debunks "five myths about nuclear energy" and questions why the USA government continues to support research and promotion of this form of power.

Nuclear energy is not clean, in that its chain of production, distribution and disposal of waste is heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Nor is it inexpensive when compared with long-term solar and wind investment. Nuclear energy won't address the challenge of climate change because over the years its high expenses will drain scarce resources from cheaper alternatives that respect the climate.

Moreover, developing nuclear energy in Zambia would put us in the company of countries that could be suspect of weapons proliferation – if not for our own needs then for the demands of others. And lastly, something more of us are aware of, nuclear power is not safe for two obvious reasons. The plants are subject to dramatic meltdowns (as at Chernobyl) and the highly toxic waste must be disposed of to prevent deadly human contamination.

So let's not talk of "nuclear energy futures" for Zambia, but address the more sensible alternatives of solar and wind power and energy-saving techniques such as small fluorescent bulbs.

ALTERNATIVES TO OIL?

What about facing the energy crisis of rising oil prices and its relationship to poverty? To satisfactorily address that question for Zambia would require much more research and explanation than possible in this brief POST column!

So let me simply point to two areas that I believe need greater attention by government, the private sector and civil society groups in Zambia. The first is the need to explore all possible dimensions and consequences of the development and use of the so-called "biofuels." Biofuels are both substitutes and supplements to oil. They are liquid fuels made from organic matter, typically crops. They can be ethanol produced from carbohydrates like sugar and maize, and biodiesel produced from oilseeds like palm and jatropha.

As global demands increase for cheaper sources of energy to drive petrol-powered vehicles (especially in the USA and other rich countries), biofuels are touted by some as attractive alternatives. But already serious questions are being raised about the impact on food prices as crops and land are diverted from food to fuel. A current World Bank report states that emphasis on biofuels are a major contributor to the dramatic – and disastrous – increase in food prices of basics such as maize, wheat and soy.

Zambia has abundant agricultural land and water and hence there is a strong push that we move more toward the production of biofuels. I pray no one is seriously arguing that we should divert maize, wheat and sugar production to provide substitutes for oil! Perhaps jatropha has more potential. But whatever route we follow, more attention should be paid to a basic question that always needs to be asked: what does this mean for the poor?

Let's hope that many recent UNZA graduates heed the very wise words of the Vice Chancellor and put their talents to addressing key issues like the current energy crisis and its relationship to poverty in this very rich country of Zambia!

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