

Country profile: Zambia



HDI ranking: ranked 153 out of 173 countries

The UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) measures a country's achievements in terms of life expectancy, educational attainment and adjusted real income.

Country background

In 1991, President Chiluba was swept to power in Zambia after helping to mobilise the popular discontent that forced the previous government to hold multi-party elections. Ten years on however, Chiluba was accused of corruption and of failing to tackle poverty and the AIDS pandemic. 2001 was marked by major splits in the ruling party, the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD). Many prominent members left in protest at Chiluba's unconstitutional intention to run for a third term, and formed the Forum for Democracy and Development in the heated run-up to the general elections in December. Chiluba decided not to run. Former vice president Levy Mwanawasa stepped in for the MMD and was inaugurated as Zambia's third president in January 2002, amid opposition claims of fraud and ballot-rigging.

Since coming to power, Mwanawasa has prompted investigations into alleged corruption during the Chiluba era and has even pressed for Chiluba's immunity from prosecution to be lifted. In January 2003, Mwanawasa proposed an 'all-inclusive' government, opening up his cabinet to opposition members with the aim of working together as a government of national unity.

Zambia's inability to diversify its economy away from rich copper reserves has had dire consequences. The mining sector accounts for 80% of Zambia's export revenue. Despite substantial reforms in the 1990s, economic performance is disappointing, with inflation and unemployment remaining high. The cost of living rose 30% in 2000/01, coupled with a deteriorating exchange rate. Privatisation in 1999 improved the prospects for copper mining to become profitable and spur economic growth but there are now fears that the falling price of copper, affected by the global economic slowdown and the knock-on effects of the 11 September terrorist attacks, will result in job losses and economic regression. Environmentalists have also raised concerns about lead contamination in mining towns.

Slow economic growth is also attributable to economic mismanagement. The former government's questionable commitment to democracy resulted in some donors cutting their aid budgets, exacerbating Zambia's debt. Recovery has also been hampered by a series of droughts and floods from the end of 2000, decimating harvests and damaging infrastructure. The World Bank pledged US\$50 million emergency assistance in November 2002 to help Zambia cope with the resultant famine, funding critical imports of farming equipment, livestock, medicines, construction supplies and vehicles to stave off the worst effects of the drought. In early 2003, the Zambian government is trying to attract new investment in farming to raise food production. A total of 90,000 hectares of land is to be allocated to commercial farmers with capital to start work immediately. More than two million Zambians are currently in need of food aid.

The burden of external debt faced by Zambia is reaching intolerable levels at US\$6 billion. In his New Year's address, President Mwanawasa said Zambia may have to find US\$300 million to service its debt in 2003, encumbering the country's economy and undermining its development efforts. The IMF earlier stated that it would delay US\$1 billion in debt relief under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries initiative if Zambia does not follow an agreed privatisation programme to sell off its national commercial bank, power utility and telecoms companies. Mwanawasa is considering suspending privatisation programmes, as they cause hefty job losses while bringing few benefits to rural areas.

Social well-being for individuals and families has indeed declined as a result of structural adjustment policies, as they divert government money away from essential services such as health care, education and road maintenance. Three-quarters of Zambia's population lives below the World Bank poverty threshold of US\$1 a day. The availability and quality of education has declined dramatically and only half of all children complete primary school. Social indicators suggest an increase in infant mortality, malnutrition and adult morbidity: under-five mortality and maternal mortality rates are now higher than they were in the 1960s and life expectancy has plummeted from 52 years in 1980 to 37 years in 2000. The government struggles to provide basic services and NGOs are emerging in every sector to fill the gaps in services. However, local NGOs are generally young and often weak themselves.

The HIV and AIDS pandemic is the largest threat to human social and economic development in Zambia. One in five adults is HIV-positive and girls are five times more likely to be infected with the HIV virus than their male counterparts, due to widespread sexual abuse. Support networks of extended families are stretched to the limit: 75% of all Zambian families care for at least one child orphaned by HIV and AIDS. The sheer magnitude of the pandemic is witnessed daily in terms of human suffering and as a looming threat to an already struggling economy, extinguishing Zambia's professional capacity. While awareness levels are now high in Zambia, many people do not know their own status: only 13% of the population has had an HIV test. In November 2001, the government announced its intention to pass a law criminalising the intentional spreading of HIV – the first of its kind in Africa.

The VSO programme

Number of volunteers in-country: 54

VSO is consolidating more than 40 years of experience in Zambia by focusing on HIV and AIDS, education and sustainable rural livelihoods. All volunteers in Zambia undertake HIV and AIDS education to promote behaviour change and reduce stigma, as well as endorsing gender equity in their placements.

The AIDS pandemic is placing enormous pressure on Zambia's already overstretched health system. VSO Zambia is part of VSO's Regional AIDS Initiative of Southern Africa, [RAISA](#), where volunteers in all skill areas work with local organisations and institutions to fight the spread and impact of AIDS by promoting behaviour change and prevention activities, strengthening care and support and reducing discrimination for people affected by the disease.

For example, volunteers strengthen provincial and district-level structures, so that health care services can be extended to rural areas. This includes voluntary counselling and testing initiatives to train counsellors and set up facilities. Former president Kenneth Kaunda took a public HIV test in 2002 at our partner organisation Society for Family Health to help encourage testing. A business volunteer has been developing the capacity and scaling up the impact of a monthly HIV/sexual reproductive health newspaper aimed at young people in Zambia. Another volunteer is a graphic designer for a health products marketing organisation. The organisation has widespread access to the population through its products and the volunteer is introducing designs for social marketing to propagate information on HIV and AIDS-related health issues.

RAISA volunteers target high risk groups such as commercial sex workers and prisoners, while developing peer education and workplace training programmes. We are investigating ways of placing HIV and AIDS volunteers in government ministries or the National AIDS Council and in advocacy roles. In particular, volunteers will support women's status and rights, to reduce the vulnerability of women to sexual victimisation and HIV infection.

Education volunteers teach in rural secondary schools in the north-western and eastern provinces, where they have been effective in raising the achievements and morale of both pupils and staff. Through targeted intervention at selected schools, the impact of volunteers on issues such as gender, student discipline, child-centred teaching methodologies and the appropriate use of laboratories is clearly evident. Volunteers have also helped to improve infrastructure in the schools they are working in. For example, one volunteer set up a piggery, enabling pupils to learn new skills and generating income for the school. Another volunteer facilitated a water project which supplies clean and reliable water to the school.

As part of our programme to address the issues around gender and HIV and AIDS through education, two volunteer teachers have designed, in close cooperation with the Kabompo district education officer, a series of workshops to help equip girls with practical ways of tackling gender inequality and understanding and dealing with HIV and AIDS. The workshops will be tested in three schools by female VSO volunteers and will then be revised before roll-out in Easter 2003 to many other schools through the training of Zambian facilitators.

Volunteers also work in community schools, formed to provide education for orphans and vulnerable children, including disabled children. They contribute to building organisational capacity. For example, a business adviser introduced a micro-finance credit scheme to ensure community funding for the schools, from which teachers will receive pay. The scheme is also designed to boost motivation and reduce high turnover rates. During 2002, VSO Zambia placed pre-service primary teacher trainers and we are hoping to pilot a district Business Partnerships placement with a peripatetic role to support strategic planning, teacher training, HIV and AIDS prevention, and capacity-building for staff in the District Education Office.

In October 2002, VSO Zambia aired a 30-minute programme on Valuing Teachers on national radio, featuring interviews with politicians, senior civil servants and unionists. It served to heighten appreciation of teachers' contributions, and to increase teacher awareness of organisations that are championing their cause. We are also developing strategic relationships with various teaching associations in Zambia to further our agenda for advocacy about education.

VSO Zambia has a series of linked placements in sustainable rural livelihoods, focusing on food security, sustainable small-scale agricultural practices and rural enterprise development. Volunteers are placed in small- and medium-scale enterprises and promote networking to share best practice. The productivity and income of small-scale farmers are enhanced by volunteers with skills in marketing, crop diversification, financial management and technology.

Other volunteers help to improve the economic viability of small- and medium-sized enterprises involved in the production and/or processing of local materials, or to strengthen the economic viability of commercial agricultural enterprises, thereby making a contribution to food security. Current volunteers include a VSO finance manager in a craft organisation and a VSO management and marketing adviser working with a producer-owned trading company. Volunteers also help avert environmental degradation by helping farmers adopt new approaches in sustainable land use and management. One volunteer in a honey-producing cooperative is encouraging enhanced livelihood security through the use of gathered non-timber forest products. Future placements will involve advocating the government towards more just and accessible policies for the most disadvantaged people in rural communities

Volunteer perspectives

"Of course there are frustrations. At work, trying to get things done can be like walking in treacle. But do I enjoy it? Am I glad I came? It is impossible to say. I despair for so much, wonder at so much, love so much. Sometimes I could stay for years, sometimes I could fly away tomorrow.

Whatever happens, I know I shall leave with a wealth of memories and a glimpse of a whole different world. Perhaps all the most memorable experiences have to be a little painful?"

"Once you've had a success you want more, and when it doesn't always come I found that quite demoralising, and to an extent, de-motivating. The secret is just to push on through and it becomes much easier to see some sunshine amongst the clouds! There is always someone out there who wants to help. I've learnt an awful lot from my Zambian colleagues, their seeming inability to let hardship and sorrow defeat them [and] their sense of humour in the face of adversity... It's been a privilege to work alongside them." [Jane Kelly, development worker, Zambia National Association of the Hearing Impaired, October 2001.](#)

Partner perspectives

"Justin's professional skills together with his adaptability and total understanding of what capacity-building means enabled him to skill share and train his colleagues. I believe that his impact is sustainable." [Zambia Integrated Health Package on VSO technical adviser Justin Highstead, December 2002.](#)