

Harmony amid the hardships

By CHANTEL EDWARDS

Travelling through Zimbabwe one is struck by the friendly warmth of the people and the high degree of reconciliation, something short of remarkable considering the situation in which they find themselves.

A crippling drought in Zimbabwe has forced rural people into the cities resulting in over-crowded squatter settlements and soaring unemployment. During a brief stop in Harare I am shocked to read that in certain regions people have begun eating their dogs in order to survive.

In the rural areas women work 18 hours a day collecting water, food and firewood to ensure the survival of their families. In Harare it would seem that food is available – if you have the money.

The markets sell fresh produce, household commodities and clothing. There is an abundance of local crafts and artwork for sale and on every street corner young children approach tourists with carvings of hippos, elephants and rhino.

The tree-lined avenues of Harare are spotlessly clean as is the countryside and we discover that this is as a result of heavy fines and on-the-spot arrests for offenders. A further reason is the sense of ownership and pride that people have in their country.

However, it would seem that since independence little has changed. The poor have remained poor and the rich have remained rich.

Very little development is apparent and this is attributed to the unemployment rate, high taxation, a lack of institutional support and the exodus of qualified people following independence.

The emphasis on rural development has been criticised by some as being for political, rather than economic reasons. Little training and follow-up aid has been made available to people placed on reclaimed farmlands, and the relatively unsophisticated Labour Relations Act has left the average farm labourer working a 10-hour day, six days a week and earning approximately 61 cents an hour or 146 dollars a month.

Education is the one field that has been fully developed – some argue to the detriment of other facets of life. Concentrating on mass-based and non-formal education has empowered people with basic skills, but unemployment is running at 25 percent and they're unable to find meaningful work.

Tradition on trial in rural areas

Traditional leaders, migrant labourers, the access of women to authority structures, redistribution of resources – these are some of the factors that make up the complex rural equation in South Africa.

In an effort to address some of these urgent issues, Idasa's Border office convened a two-day conference entitled "Rural Local Government: Understanding the Challenges" in East London on July 17 and 18.

Discussions got off to a volatile start as delegates debated the degree to which the concept of traditional leaders was compatible with democracy. Some said the very notion of traditional leaders – who assumed their position by birth and were not subject to regular elections – ran contrary to the basis of democracy. Others like, Chief Justice Mabandla from Ciskei and Transkei's Chief G S Notha argued that chiefs served their subjects and were accountable to them.

Lechesa Tsenoh of the SA National Civics Organisation said civics saw themselves as democratic institutions which were inclusive bodies. However, all delegates agreed on the need for further talks between civics and traditional leaders to ensure better relations.

The sustainability of rural local government and its relationship with the urban centre was addressed by Development Action Group researcher Laurine Platzky.

She said that in South Africa, the differences between urban and rural areas was not as great as in other African countries where cities and villages were clearly defined. The reason for this was that rural areas had no

real access to land and due to forced removals to the bantustans, people were living in densely populated areas without the advantages of urban or rural life.

She added, however, that no local government could be completely self-contained and a redistribution of resources should not mean that urban areas were the source and rural areas the recipients. Redistribution should occur on a national scale.

The Border region and nearby homelands had played a significant role in developing the wealth of the Witwatersrand area through migrant labour policies. In turn, the fall in the gold price and consequent retrenchments directly affected rural families in that region.

"National and even international developments have an influence on individuals in rural communities," said Ms Platzky. Therefore, local authorities should participate in national decisions because the impact of various policies would be felt in their constituencies.

On the issue of elections, Ms Platzky said people who were poor were vulnerable. In addition, women made up the vast majority of rural population yet they were often excluded from decision-making and were therefore ignorant of trends and current issues.

"The proportion of women attending courses to upgrade their level of education and understanding should be increased so their majority can be well represented on bodies such as village councils," she said.

Spare the child

By NDUMI GWAYI

Child labour and exploitation came under the spotlight at an Idasa meeting in East London on June 15.

Guest speakers were Prof Chris Hummel from Rhodes University's history department, who spoke on the history of child labour in industrial revolution Britain, and Mrs A C Mbalu from Frere Hospital who addressed the issue of children's rights.

The audience consisted mainly of people from the black township of Duncan Village as well as academics, nurses, social workers and representatives from various service organisations.

Mrs Mbalu said what was at issue was not children's needs, but their rights, and this

presupposed an obligation to deliver what was rightfully theirs. This included an environment conducive to growing up normally and to learning and to a society which accepted its responsibility for the development and protection of its children.

She said the citizens' role was to ensure that inadequacies in society were exposed while the government should provide education, health and decent living conditions for children.

After enthusiastic debate it was decided that further workshops would be convened soon.

Ndumi Gwayi is Idasa's regional director in the Border area.