

Bleak Prospects for Schools and Universities

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Soaring fees and teacher exodus threaten education of Zimbabwe's children. A Zimbabwean teachers' union is calling on the government to postpone the start of the upcoming academic year, warning that economic turmoil will mean a low turnout of both staff and pupils

"The date [of January 13] for this year's first term is unrealistic," said Munyaradzi Chauke, a representative of main teaching union, the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, PTUZ.

"Teachers do not have money to travel to their [schools] and parents do not have money for fees and cannot afford to buy uniforms.

He urged the authorities to address the situation before term begins, "As an organisation, we think it is proper for the [ministry of education] to delay the opening until everything is in order."

Zimbabwe's education system, once the finest Africa, is in chaos due to severe staff shortages and dwindling resources in government-funded schools. Even private ones are now losing staff, as impoverished teachers look for more remunerative positions in neighbouring countries.

Hundreds of thousands of teachers have reportedly left for countries such as South Africa and Botswana. Others have simply abandoned the profession for better paid, though often more menial jobs.

Most teachers here earn about 10 billion Zimbabwean dollars a month, which, in this hyperinflation-racked country, is worth less than one US dollar.

By comparison, their colleagues in South Africa receive roughly between 7,000 and 10,000 rand a month (740 - 1,058 US dollars). South Africa is reportedly looking for at least 94,000 qualified teachers.

Zimbabwe teachers' unions blame the low state salaries on offer to teachers and lecturers for a brain drain of skilled personnel.

Teachers are now demanding wages of 2,500 US dollars a month – a reasonable sum, they say, considering hyperinflation, estimated at 231 million per cent, and the increasing "dollarisation" of the economy, as many traders now insist on being paid in the American currency.

Meanwhile, observers say that prohibitively expensive school fees mean that growing numbers of children are being denied an education.

Both private and public schools are charging fees for the upcoming term in US dollars, demanding anything from 200 to 2,500 for primary and secondary education – sums the vast majority of people can only dream of being able to afford.

The collapse of the country's socio-economic system has had a devastating effect on school attendance, according to a recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF.

It stated that just over 20 per cent of children attended school in 2008, a drop from more than 85 per cent in 2007.

UNICEF representative in Zimbabwe Roeland Monasch pointed out that many schools closed three months early in 2008 because teachers were no longer coming to work.

He said he feared that teachers would not show up when the schools reopen for the new term, and stressed that they had to be given more financial support.

"What we need to do is to make sure that teachers are motivated and are able to come back to school, and that really all depends on the support we can provide those teachers," he said.

UNICEF is working with the education ministry to investigate the possibility of setting up an incentive scheme to encourage teachers to return to their posts. The hope is that more than 100,000 can be encouraged to go back to work, by raising their salaries and providing them with food aid.

"For that, of course, we need some donor support," said Monasch.

Clever Bere, president of the Zimbabwe National Students Union, ZINASU, called for the government to tackle swiftly the shortages of qualified lecturers, learning materials and accommodation before the start of the new academic year.

"The government must get its act together and ensure that the education sector is restored to its former glory," he said.

"Virtually no learning took place in our schools, colleges and universities in 2008."

Bere said that many still hope the shaky power-sharing deal signed by President Robert Mugabe and two leaders of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, in September 2008 will eventually be implemented and lead to the recovery of the education sector.

Since the agreement was signed more than three months ago, the parties have been unable to form a government, largely due to disputes over the allocation of key ministries.

"The agreement, as flawed as it is, provides the only opportunity to take Zimbabwe back to her glory days. The economy is bleeding, there is a desperate humanitarian crisis, the nation is deeply divided, and there is lack of confidence," said Bere.

“Only through the implementation of this agreement can the country be rescued.”

Jabu Shoko is the pseudonym of an IWPR reporter in Zimbabwe.

Location: Africa

Focus: Zimbabwe Crisis Reports

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bleak-prospects-schools-and-universities>