

## **Hope for Zimbabwe but big changes needed**

“It always seems impossible until it’s done” said Nelson Mandela. He wasn’t, but he could have been talking about the road to reform and recovery in Zimbabwe. As a foreigner here, you can truly feel the potential of Zimbabwe: its location, its natural assets, its climate and, above all, its smart, hard-working, and endlessly resilient people.

Nothing would make me happier than for that potential to be fully realised. I remain optimistic about this country’s long-term future. But like many Zimbabweans I am worried about the short-term future, given the deteriorating economic situation and the lack of political will and space to have a serious, inclusive conversation about the reform that is necessary for recovery.

What then is the road to realising the ambitions of the Zimbabwean people? For certain, it is not the road back to the past. Zimbabwe is a proud, independent nation and we, the British, want to engage as equals and with mutual respect. Zimbabwe’s future recovery is in its own hands, and must be driven by its government, parliament, institutions and, above all, its people.

The international community cannot own the process of reform and recovery, but the UK and other friends of Zimbabwe do what we can to support the people of Zimbabwe. The UK does a huge amount here. We’re one of the two largest donors. Over the last four years we have supported 890,000 Zimbabweans achieve food security, supported 170,000 children in primary and early secondary education, supported midwives and nurses who have attended 160,000 births of Zimbabwean babies and reached 1.76 million people with our water, sanitation and hygiene programmes. We also promote strong people to people links. A great example is our flagship Chevening Scholarship programme, which supports 20 Zimbabwean students a year to undertake a Masters programme in their chosen field at our top Universities. This year in celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare’s death we put on a magnificent production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. The British Council supports English language and wider cultural links.

But let me be clear that our support doesn’t include organising “a bailout” for the government. We have no intention of doing that. Nor does it mean trying to pick who should lead the country – we do not back any party, faction or person. Those are decisions strictly for the people of Zimbabwe. As diplomats we always strive to work with the government of our host country– that’s our main job – but also with all the main political opposition actors, institutions, businesses and civil society organisations.

So what else can Zimbabwe’s many international friends do? I think the most important thing we can do is set out a path to normal relations between Zimbabwe and the international community and do all we can to encourage Zimbabwe to follow it. I am clear that normalisation of relations will bring huge dividends to Zimbabwe: most notably the potential for delivering the international investment that this country needs so urgently. The UK strongly supports a structured dialogue around the pathway to normalisation, but we’ve been consistently clear that the onus is on the government of Zimbabwe to deliver the reform package it articulated at Lima a year ago and to demonstrate commitment to the letter and spirit of its own Constitution, particularly as regards the rights of citizens. Progress on both has faltered but that should not prevent us from continuing to discuss what a reform and recovery pathway looks like. For the UK the following issues are fundamental:

First, any pathway needs sustained improvements in human rights and upholding the basic political freedoms of speech, peaceful assembly and the right to privacy. Yet we are currently witnessing a deterioration, including incidents of police brutality, and a worrying re emergence of reported abductions and torture.

Second, determined economic reforms. It is essential to stimulate both domestic and foreign investment. That means taking a rigorous comprehensive approach to property rights, imposing regulatory and fiscal stability and achieving economic empowerment through employment rather than appropriation. It means labour market flexibility and an emphasis on skills and productivity.

Third, government expenditure and excess needs to be reined in. For every two dollars the government raises in taxes it spends three – that is unsustainable. Who is paying the difference?

Fourth, the Constitution is a major achievement, but what can be described as “constitutionalism” is not yet embedded as the foundation of rule of law and human rights. With an election less than two years away, it is a priority to ensure electoral laws are in line with the constitution so that the outcome of the election itself is not contested.

Fifth, we hope government effort will be focused on the most vulnerable during the reform process. Although we and other donors stand by to assist, ultimately the government must take the lead in ensuring schools, hospitals and the hungry are protected through the difficult adjustment.

Finally, we all need to communicate more clearly with the people of this country what we are doing and why. Britain and the international community, as well as the government, Reserve Bank and other critical institutions can all get better at this.

We will continue to stand with the people of Zimbabwe. The path to restoring a normal relationship with the international community is clear and consistent with the Constitution of Zimbabwe and the government’s own economic plan as articulated in Lima last year. It may be difficult and take time to follow, but it is definitely not impossible.