POVERTY ALLEVIATION THROUGH THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY - THE CASE OF ZAMBIA'S RURAL AREAS

PETER M MUKALULA
(LECTURER – CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT, COPPERBELT UNIVERSITY, KITWE, ZAMBIA)

Abstract

About 73% of the Zambian population is said to live below the poverty line of US$1 per day. The Zambian government, in collaboration with multilateral donors, undertook to prepare a comprehensive strategy to stimulate growth and create employment through the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). In tackling poverty, economic growth was the key vehicle for growth stimulating interventions expressed in major economic sectors such as agriculture, education and health. The construction industry, as a tool that translates policy into realities of buildings and infrastructure services, has been used to try to improve the livelihood of the people. However, the growing reality is that despite the use of this costly intervention in rural areas, there is evidence of failure in adequately targeting the poor and the vulnerable by inappropriate budgetary locative patterns that have generally biased resources against pro-poor interventions, weak integration of the poor, particularly small-scale farmers in the market and weakness in governance in both the economic and political dimensions. However, through the adoption of sustainable construction practices in Zambia's comprehensive strategy, alleviation of poverty could be a reality. There is an imbalance in the application of indigenous construction technologies and conventional construction technologies. The study showed that rural areas are forced to adopt technologies that are not energy threatening to the environment on a large scale.

Key Words

Poverty, Economic strategy, Sustainable construction practices

1. Introduction

Poverty in Zambia, like elsewhere, is multi-dimensional and it is due to complex factors, both personal and societal. Rural poverty is largely attributed to poorly functioning markets for agricultural productivity because of reliance on very basic implements as well as low utilization of agricultural inputs. Poverty is most prevalent in rural areas although according to the living conditions and monitoring survey of 1998, some provinces have marginally reduced it. It is suspected that this may be due to the shift towards cash crops (Diangamo, 2001).

Studies undertaken by the National Council for Construction (NCC, 2003) show that problems experienced throughout the country are generally similar, such as poverty, lack of infrastructure and the lack of key capacity players in the construction industry. In summary, the worsening poverty trend in Zambia is primarily a product of (C.S.O, 2002):

- Lack of economic growth while the population has more than trebled since independence
• Inadequate or inappropriate targeting of the poor and vulnerable people as evidenced by inappropriate budgetary locative patterns that have generally biased resources against pro-poor interventions.
• Weak integration of the poor, particularly small-scale farmers into the market.
• Weakness in governance in both its economic and political dimensions

Government’s demonstration of its commitment is one that can be exemplified in the allocation of resources in the national budget, which is an important tool to the realization of poverty eradication. The government's goal is to reduce poverty in a sustainable manner, to 50% by the year 2004 (Diangamo, 2001).

2. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper And The Zambian Construction Industry (Z.C.I)

Poverty reduction can be understood in three ways (Robb, 2002):

i) Increasing income and general assets to a level where the poor are less vulnerable to risks and falling below a certain level.
ii) Giving people greater control and the means to determine their lives
iii) The rural poor’s perceptions of their own poverty in a process of sharing strategies, priorities and solutions of various stakeholders, thus incorporating the community in Poverty Participatory Assessment (PPA).

Reducing poverty requires investment in areas where the poor live and in activities they pursue. The International Development Association's (IDA) experience confirms that investing in rural social and economic infrastructure can raise the incomes and living standards of the poor (Gwin, 2002).

The main objective of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2002), as an economic strategy, is to facilitate sustainable economic growth and subsequently reduce poverty through the identification of sectors that have a strong potential for economic growth and are critical for social development. These ranged from strengthening and protecting of human capital, improving governance and rehabilitating public infrastructure such as roads, schools and health clinics as well as macroeconomics, agriculture, tourism, mining, industry, governance, health and education. A review of the construction industry’s performance shows that value added in the construction sector grew by 11.5% in 2001 compared to 6.5% in 2000. The multiplier effects that are inherent show its importance to any nation’s economy. It has generally been found in most economies that $1 invested in the economy has an effect of about $13 for the whole economy. This multiplier is higher than any other branch of the economy (Ndilila, 2003).

3 Poverty Alleviation in Sustainable Development

Acknowledging the fact that construction activities devour huge quantities of natural resources in man’s quest for socio-economic development and a better quality of life (World Commission on Environment and Development, Agenda 21, 2001), conditions obtaining in Zambia for sustainable development are to a large extent lacking. Macroeconomic policies and institutional reforms, although well intended, have created huge demands on the environment amidst extreme poverty and social maladjustment. The clear signs of unsustainable development are continuously being aided by, inter alia:
- Population pressure,
- Poverty,
- Resource depletion, and
- Zambia’s huge external financial debt to multilateral donors.

Achieving sustainable development will therefore entail a total emancipation from these factors. PRSP efforts are therefore, in the right direction to this end. But there is more to be done. The natural and cultural elements of the environment, as a potential development site, are of critical importance and must be respected and harnessed in all parts of the design, construction and operation processes of the targeted PRSP activities.

3.1 Sustainable Construction Impact on PRSP Activities

3.1.1 Sustainable Construction: Infrastructure Development

PRSP ((Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2002) interventions for rural development points out road infrastructure as important for linking outlying areas with the rest of the country that spurred development in the health, educational and agricultural sectors. Construction sustainability, in practice (see figure 3a), takes the form of related initiatives in:

- Design for minimum waste
- Lean construction (and minimize waste)
- Minimize energy in construction and use
- Preserve and enhance biodiversity
- Conserve water resources
- Respect people and local environment
- Set targets (monitor and report, in order to benchmark performance).

It is evident that such practices involve the use of design, construction methods and materials that are resource efficient and that will not compromise the ‘health’ of the environment.

![Diagram](image-url)
To make such practices mainstream for rural stakeholder dwellers, is definitely, ‘a going against the grain’. Weaning them from an environment they are dependant upon is not given up without a fight. Resistance is mainly ameliorated through the provision of the much-needed developmental infrastructure as they are attracted by:

- Improved public health through the provision of health centers
- Employment during the period of the project initiatives and beyond the point of completion.
- Climate stabilization due to non-destruction of the environment as they become sensitized.
- Easy links, through construction and rehabilitation of roads, are established between production centers and markets that are mainly located in the rural areas.
- Improved literacy levels due to construction of schools and other inter linking infrastructure.

Road construction and rehabilitation has certainly been a strong catalyst to sustainable construction.

3.2 Unsustainable Construction: The Contradicting Evidence in the PRSP

3.2.1 Lack of Monitoring Capacity

Lack of appropriate legislation/incentives and capacity for implementation has led to a construction industry with very little regard for environmental considerations. Since the introduction of legislation that made Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) mandatory for any major construction project, the body set up to conduct Environmental Audits has only two officers in its employment for a country with projects dotted about a country the size of Texas! This apparent lapse obviates the very ethos of the enforcement of sustainable construction.

3.2.2 Lean Budgetary Allocations

Sustainable construction needs resources to be able to realize it. Failure in adequately targeting the rural poor and the vulnerable is evidenced by inappropriate national budgetary locative patterns that are akin to pro-poor interventions, fostered through the PRSP, leading to weak integration of the poor, particularly, small-scale farmers in the market.

3.2.3 Lack of interest by Stakeholders in the issue of Sustainability

Sustaining such interest comes with a cost in terms of offering alternative construction practices for those used to indigenous construction techniques as opposed to conventional methods. In the face of poverty and its attendant hunger, illness and other manifestations, individuals undertake a number of activities aimed at improving their situation. Survival strategies such as charcoal burning, construction of village houses or huts (using mud and pole), tend to accelerate the depletion of forests cannot be sustainable in the long run, unless adequately compensated by forest regeneration programmes.
4. Survey and Case studies: Construction Industry in Poverty Alleviation

A survey was conducted on 36 organizations consisting of 20 civil societies, 8 professional bodies and 8 government departments currently working on projects related to poverty matters in the country, as highlighted in the PRSP. The aim of the survey was threefold:

- To establish the role of the ZCI in poverty reduction
- To establish whether sustainable construction practices are prevalent in the ZCI
- To determine whether construction activities make an impact in terms of poverty reduction in the rural areas.

The three case studies carried out in three provinces were of projects undertaken by the Zambian Government under the PRSP and funded through the Zambia Social Investment Fund (ZAMSIF, 2001), involving construction works that were targeted at poverty reduction. These included the construction of bridges at Munyeke (Choma rural, Southern province) and at Lufubu (Kawambwa, Luapula province), as well as a rural health center at Mutende (Chingola, Copperbelt province).

4.1 General Conclusions and Recommendations from the Survey and Case Studies

- In spite of the fact that the PRSP has a number of interventions put in place for the sectors targeted, implementation of these has been gravely hampered by inadequate funding. The agriculture, health and education sectors have made significant progress but fall short of the expected targets. Expected poverty ‘alleviation/reduction’ levels are therefore in jeopardy due to late start of projects targeting poverty, the majority of which are construction based. The national budget must address this by allocating more funds.

- In projects that the communities affected were willing to participate, the end product, in terms of quality, was affected. Burnt bricks, which were not properly fired, lacked durability. While it is appreciated that increased labor-based construction activities can help alleviate poverty; quality-monitoring mechanisms should have been organized in order to ensure the sustainability of the projects. The sense of ownership, evidenced in such participation, not only bound such communities, but also ushered in the expectation of increased activity coming with those developments. Such opportunities would ease poverty. There was a noted improvement in the quality of life that arose out of income generating ventures.

- Only government projects especially those of road projects were carefully planned in line with sustainable construction practices to help alleviate poverty in rural areas. Policies to uplift the phenomenon of sustainable construction are currently being put in place. This has seen the enactment of pieces of legislation that have made it mandatory for environmental impact assessments (EIA) to be done on all major construction projects.

- There is some show of impatience, in terms of interest, in the adoption of sustainable concepts for rural stakeholders who are dependent on the environment as much as the construction process suggesting that awareness levels for sustainable construction practices are low. Application of construction technologies friendly to their environment is wholesomely accepted while there is a rejection of methods that are perceived to be conventionally expensive. Re-education, in terms of construction methods, that comes through rural construction interventions, is however, helping minimize the depletion of
resources. The National Council for Construction can play a key role in policy formulation for sustainable construction practices.

- Government should come up with deliberate policies to enhance sustainable construction practices and increase rural development. Therefore, the concentration should be in the rural areas than urban areas where the levels of poverty are more. Direct investment in agriculture infrastructure will pave way to greater poverty alleviation especially as evidenced in the 2002/3 agricultural seasons where there was a recorded bumper harvest, first ever in years!

REFERENCES


CSPR (2002) *What can we do about poverty in Zambia* A summary of Governments draft poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) Sponsored by UNDP


