



Centre for Conflict Management and Transformation

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**Human Rights and Social  
Cohesion: The State of  
Play**

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I will begin by quoting a short paragraph from the second edition of The American Heritage Dictionary of Student Science. It provides a brief fact on evolution. It reads:

*Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection assumed that tiny adaptations occur in organisms constantly over exceptionally long periods of time. Gradually a new species develops that is distinct from its ancestors.*

*In the 1970s, however, biologists Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould proposed that evolution by natural selection was a far more bumpy road. Based on types of fossils that exist around the world, they said that evolution is better described through punctuated equilibrium. That is, for long periods of time, species in fact remain virtually unchanged, not even gradually adapting. They are in equilibrium, in a balance with the environment. But when confronted with environmental challenges—sudden climate change, for example—organisms adapt quite quickly, perhaps in only a few thousand years.*

*These active periods are punctuations, after which a new equilibrium exists and species remain stable until the next punctuation.*

You may be wondering what link exists between evolutionary theory and our discussion on human rights and social cohesion. I've decided to use the analogy of biological evolution to illustrate how behaviour and attitudes evolve within a societal context. An individual's behavior and attitude, like his or her biological state, are influenced by the context within which they live. I say this not from a theoretical stand point but from the personal experience of seeing myself respond to context challenges in a way similar to that described by Eldredge and Gould. I'm sure those of you who were living in Zimbabwe from 2007 – 8 may have had had similar personal experiences; as you know during this time our country was bereft of any goods, the supermarkets were empty and you had to hunt for whatever food and other basic commodities you needed. Well on one of our Saturday morning hunting trips, my husband and I had the luck of finding bread in a small shop and believe it or not they were not restricting the number of loaves customers could take. I couldn't believe my luck and proceeded to pile my trolley high, ZESA was a little more reliable then and I could easily stock these loaves in my freezer. While I was in this frenzy, my husband asked me why I was taking so many loaves and wasn't I going to leave some bread for others? My first, second and third thought were has this man gone mad, how could I pass up a chance like this? It



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wasn't a time to be thinking of other people, we had ourselves and our children to feed and we would be fine for bread for at least two weeks. I reluctantly put some loaves back but only because he insisted I do so but I was quite angry about having to do this. It was only after many months when we had developed some coping mechanisms that I reflected on this incident. I had always considered myself a reasonably generous person and someone who would think of others but within this particular context, the "punctuation" of 2007-8, my instinct to survive kicked in and my behaviour and attitude changed to ensure mine and my families' survival.

Reflecting on my experience and seeing the current state of Zimbabwe's society, I realise that this response to our context has not been mine alone. And for those who were and are in a more hostile context than I was and am, their behaviour and attitudes have probably evolved even more dramatically than mine becoming acutely destructive.

The effect Zimbabwe's economic decline has had on the world view and values of Zimbabweans as a whole is profound. It has created a highly unpredictable environment where most individuals and communities, being unaware of where their next meal will come from, live in a state of heightened insecurity. This environment affects how Zimbabweans behave as individuals and relate to each other as a society. If one refers to Maslow's human motivation theory illustrated by the hierarchy of needs pyramid, the majority of Zimbabweans expend greater energy and time working on areas in the two bottom rungs of the pyramid; that is trying to meet basic needs, these being physiological and security needs.<sup>1</sup> This state results in the creation of a very competitive environment that has both positive and negative consequences on the society. A positive consequence is that people are forced out of their comfort zones and inspired to achieve more than they would in a less challenging environment. They are more willing to take risks as there is less to lose and are more receptive to ideas that may be outside of their normal knowledge frame and belief system. The negative consequence of such an environment is that it ultimately produces a highly individualistic citizen whose ability to see beyond his/her own needs diminishes. Where an individual's total focus is on meeting his/her needs with little regard of the consequences for another individual, the community fabric disintegrates and there is little or no contribution that is made to the communal aspects of a society. In such an environment an individual will, before participating in any activity, ask himself "and..... what's in it for me?" This attitude will result in him

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<sup>1</sup> **Physiological needs** – breathing, food, water, sleep. **Security needs** – shelter, security of body, family, health



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/her using whatever leverage he may have to advance his individual agenda. This could be his/her job within the public or private sector, his position as an elected or appointed leader or any position within the community that allows him/her to access a resource that others cannot.

In Zimbabwe the consequence is that few people are taking care of the communal space that must be maintained if the country is to function effectively. In such a scenario service provision is very poor and the majority of citizens fail to meet their responsibility to contribute to the larger communal space. Infrastructure like roads, schools and hospitals that need to be maintained are no longer providing adequate services because resources that should be earmarked for their maintenance have been used to personally benefit individuals who should manage them.<sup>2</sup> When ordinary citizens need to access these services they no longer seek them from state funded institutions but must find their own income to pay a private individual or institution to access this service. A situation now exists where each person must fend for him/herself and there is no social cohesion.

In such a context the concept of an individual's right to education, health, water or shelter will not be at the fore of a societies' priorities. For example, a teacher who is fully aware of the role she plays in a child's right to education will easily, and without guilt, spend three quarters of a school term carrying out personal errands to augment her income so she can feed her family, after all do her children not have a right to the food and shelter she is providing through supplementing her meager income? Within such a context the concept of rights as espoused in the bill of rights is an intellectual concept far removed from the everyday realities of communities. And when I refer to communities I mean this in the broad sense that includes grass root communities, institutional communities as in government or business).

When we speak of rights as nations I think we do so as an ideal to aspire to. No nation or society can lay claim to its citizens enjoying all the rights they are entitled to and I'm sure it will take many positive evolutionary punctuations before any can achieve this. However in our quest to improve as the human race we will continue to aspire to do so. And in our work as development practitioners this aspiration informs our work and programmes. And when we plan our programmes we recognise that the best chance our communities have of entering a positive and constructive state of being is if they are cohesive

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<sup>2</sup>Corruption all in a day's work: June 20 2014; Herald: 'Mr. Speaker Sir'  
Zimbabwe independent: Feb 13 2015: Audit reports expose parastatal rot  
Zimbabwe mining development fund looted: Auditor General: 23 March 2014 New Zimbabwe



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and we also recognise that that cohesion can be achieved through the realisation of our rights as individuals and citizens. How do we achieve this within this context?

I think we must first be aware that in pushing to achieve social cohesion we are working against the strong force of instinct. The very strong human instinct to survive that has been triggered by the very difficult contextual challenges that Zimbabweans are living through today. This force is what will make each of us ask, “And...what’s in it for me?” and our programming has to change that question for each of us and have us asking “And... what is in it for **US**”. This is a tough mandate that we have given ourselves, what is it that we must do to get a national or local government official using his position to amass resources for himself to begin to think beyond the me and start to think of the us? Or the community member who is the treasurer at a rural school and gives his brother a contract to do the carpentry work for a school project when there are better carpenters in the community offering a cheaper service. We must understand that each of these people is aware that outside their position of influence there is a wasteland and they understand that once they move out of this space it is likely that their access to resources will dry up.

Our programming must be such that this individual will begin to see the benefit of using his position to begin to transform that wasteland into fertile space that will benefit the community he should be serving and ultimately will benefit him when the time comes for him to move from his current position. For us to achieve this we must be realistic about our sphere of influence. We must ask ourselves as practitioners “how much more influence do we have versus all the other forces at play within the context”. Where a community is immersed in a context where the instinct to survive has been triggered and is destroying social cohesion it is unlikely that the single events like workshops or trainings will change behaviour and attitude. Programming must be sustained and must be designed in a way that gives space and time to the community to reflect and make conscious choices to shift the various aspects of their context that are triggering the individualistic behaviour. They should be given space and time to see the benefits of being part of a larger and more cohesive social unit and make the changes that they want and not necessarily the changes that we want to see. As development practitioners we must be aware that we are outsiders and very specific ideas of how we think a community should evolve may not be what the community wants. A community can be at an evolutionary stage that we are not aware of and an imposition of our ideals may cause more harm than good. One thing that I have observed working on sustained processes



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within communities is that given the space and time to solve very tangible challenges they are experiencing, communities will develop very inclusive holistic and beneficial solutions that espouse many of the rights that our constitution contains. Not because they have been taught or trained about rights but through tapping into the deeper level of their behavioural and attitudinal DNA and making a conscious choice to defy instinct and change themselves and with that their whole community.