

BarotseLand.com

Mission statement

-To initiate, energise, interconnect and promote the upward development of the people of Western Province, Zambia through effective communicative, enabling and management strategies.

Stakeholders

- The people of Western Province, Zambia
- The Government of the Republic of Zambia
- The Barotse Royal Establishment
- Funding bodies and institutions

Background

The present Western Province of Zambia, as in its previous, larger manifestation of BarotseLand, comprises the fertile, flat Buluzi floodplain of the River Zambezi, which flows from north to south through the territory and the surrounding higher wooded ground containing dry forest and scrub. The entire region lies in the Kalahari sandbelt although in the Plain this is mostly overlain by silt and soil brought by the annual flooding of the River Zambezi. This means that moisture absorption is low and trickle-through high in all except the flood season when the Buluzi Plain resembles a giant sea. The albedo effect, particularly in winter when the sun shines all day long with dry winds, is high and frosts occur at night in an otherwise sub-tropical region.

At present, Western province is the least developed part of Zambia. The explanation for this situation lies in the political and economic history of the sub-region both in the colonial and post-colonial eras. Paradoxically, BarotseLand, in its pre-colonial manifestation, was a self-sufficient centralised state that supported its own people and produced food surpluses to trade with external groups. This is not to say that there were not bad years but it is certainly the case that the people of BarotseLand enjoyed one of the better standards of living in the sub-region. That said this project does not seek to apportion blame but rather to promote, devise and implement solutions.

Western Province is very rural, although fairly densely, if unevenly populated and is very poorly connected with the rest of Zambia and the sub-region at large. The chief town, Mongu, at present does not receive any scheduled flights from the national capital, Lusaka or elsewhere and the only public transport option, road transport, survives along roads that are mostly poorly surfaced and maintained. The only tarred road into Western Province is the 615 km road from Lusaka, stretches of which are so badly potholed that vehicles have to travel on tracks to the side of the road which become virtually impassable in the rainy season. There is also a 60 km stretch from Livingstone west to the small settlement of Kazungula where a pontoon ferries vehicles over to Botswana but this road has also experienced surface deterioration due to over-usage by heavy vehicles in the past few years.

Electricity is supplied to the province via a 25 kv line from the Victoria Falls hydro-electric power station, which is showing signs of age and has to cope with increasingly variable flows of water along the Zambezi which may be due to climate change, corresponding to similar fluctuations along other major rivers in the region. However, electricity is only available in Mongu, Limulunga, Senanga, Sesheke, Kaoma and a half dozen of the other major villages in the region. Even in those settlements where electricity is available via the parastatal supplier, Zesco, most cannot afford this luxury. The supply and availability of services such as fresh piped water and telecommunications suffer very similar distributive, logistical and affordability constraints.

In the field of public health, user fees are charged, although not universally, making even the modest health facilities and drugs unaffordable and inaccessible to most. Hospitals exist at Mongu and Mwanandi and 'clinics' are interspersed throughout the province but most of these facilities with the exception of Mwanandi in the far south are very poorly equipped and suffer from regular shortages of basic drugs such as quinine. The most virulent diseases in the region are malaria and AIDS although few statistics are available for analysis. In an estimate made in 2000 it was reckoned that the average life expectancy in Zambia had fallen from 54 in the mid-1980s to just 40 and was set to reduce even further with the increasing number of deaths from AIDS. In Western Province there is an above-average distribution of older people resulting from migration of the younger, more productive stratas to the Copper Belt, Lusaka or southern Africa and a tendency of older Lozis to return to their homeland for retirement. This dynamic increases an already over-

burdened dependent population in the region. Education fares no better than health with many families being unable to keep their children in school and higher education becoming the preserve of only the wealthiest or most privileged. With AIDS predominantly attacking the most productive sector of local society (young adults and children) and declining education opportunities, this has a potentially disastrous knock-on effect for the future productivity of a region beset by economic ills.

The policies of previous Governments and of the World Bank and IMF whose dictates have been largely adhered to by Zambia added to the protectionist policies of most developed world countries mean that opportunities for advancement out of the poverty trap are severely constrained. It is certain that the future of human development in rural regions such as Western Province are going to have to be centred around what might be termed self-help projects. This does not mean that outside assistance will not be sought, quite the opposite. Yet the nature of previous assistance has not resulted in positive growth and development in Barotseland and the level of aid from the developed world is not likely to increase while the extent of the problems that exacerbate poverty are quite likely to get worse throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century and beyond. Thus community and externally originating efforts towards local self-sufficiency in food supported perhaps by technology and advice from outside (for example in the introduction of better quality seed), are to be welcomed. Other projects such as 'village tourism' and craft-selling that inject funds directly into the local communities are also welcome in this regard. Western Province's varied flora and fauna added to some remarkably beautiful physical landscapes and a generally safe and friendly human environment lend the region to serious tourism potential.

Barotseland.com seeks to promote all such efforts as well as marketing the region's potential to outside interests such as NGOs and even commercial enterprises so long as their efforts do not destroy the fabric of local production and trade. Barotseland.com's primary concern both with its own initiatives and the communication of all other development initiatives taking place, is to inject power and ownership of the region's development into the hands of responsible local civil society and leadership without undermining the local and regional political status quo. The organisation is specifically non-political and hopes to co-operate with any local government or authority of whatever hue in the pursuance of its aims which should reflect at all times the aims of the people of Western Province.

Strategies

-To improve the awareness of all development activities past, present and planned in the Western Province of Zambia and to make all components, participating plus interested parties in the positive development of the region aware of one another's existence and activities. This would be achieved through a process of investigation and monitoring and through the use of up to date communication media and IT resources which would be built up as part of a development strategy to be initiated by Barotseland.com

This strategy is based on the premise that one of the main reasons for failure of past development projects throughout sub-Saharan Africa and perhaps in the rest of the developing world has been lack of effective communication at various levels. This can be due to a failure to involve local people in addressing needs or by ignoring them in the planning and execution of initiatives. Very often failure occurs because local people simply have not had ideas explained to them or because people come among them who are strangers, do not speak the local language and/or do not listen to local people's feelings or take their fears into account. It can also be due to a failure to consult with local authority whether that be in the form of Government, traditional authority of just local leadership. There has also been a problem of different organisations overlapping in their development efforts due to lack of communication for several reasons.

-To pursue the follow-through of development projects that have taken place in the past and have either been abandoned or have stagnated; to investigate why this happened and to learn from the experience.

The logic here is that development projects often seem to falter or terminate due to the drying up of funds, the abandonment of projects by development organisations that change their priorities, because of civil instability, for political reasons or for a plethora of other explanations. The objective of Barotseland.com is to encourage and promote sustainable development, that is development initiatives, policies and strategies designed to uplift human development on an ongoing basis and in such a way that local people benefit over a period of time. It is also felt that local involvement in development strategies are key to their success, both in

planning, execution and learning from the outcomes. Preferably local people should be able to take over the running of these projects wherever possible although this is not the only criteria for success. It is recognised that external help and assistance, both financial and technical, particularly from the more highly economically developed world is required and must be courted in order to meet development objectives but such assistance should be directed primarily to the long-term benefit and ownership of the target audience, the people of Western Province. In this objective, BarotseLand.com is ideally placed with its permanent location in the heart of Western province, Zambia and in the UK.

-to initiate development strategies in the form of:

- a history project entitled 'The Living History of the Lozi Project'
- an IT project aimed at bringing training and education in the benefits of IT to the people of western Province
- a inter-school relational network between the schools of Western Province and those of the West Midlands in the

The history project has two components, firstly, a qualitative historical research project that aims to trace the history of the Lozi peoples across the five post-colonial states in which Lozi peoples are currently located and secondly, the development and promotion of the Nayuma Museum and Heritage Centre in Limulunga in order to create a vibrant museum of Lozi history and culture, an archive for academic research and a craft centre for the sale of Lozi arts and crafts created by artisans from around Western Province.

IT is a particularly expensive and scarce commodity in Zambia as in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa with the exception of South Africa where most facilities and outlets in Africa are located. In rural areas, it is almost as if the IT revolution and the knowledge age exist in a parallel universe. Indeed the knowledge divide is increasing the overall division of wealth and opportunity between the developed and developing worlds at an ever increasing rate. The objective of this project is to make IT useful to an essentially rural community as well as to provide opportunities for businesses and organisations in the region. The creation of an IT centre in the main town of Mongu offering IT facilities at locally affordable prices and training is central to the aims of this initiative.

Exchanges of information and experiences at school are a key way of linking communities in otherwise unconnected worlds and bringing home the realities of one another's existences and lives. By creating links between educational establishments in Western Province and the UK, this initiative would aim at fostering long-lasting relationships whereby knowledge could be exchanged, contacts created which could be of use in the future and urgent needs, certainly from the angle of the Zambian schools, could be communicated to the outside world and perhaps acted on. In the early stages a pilot project involving 6-8 schools is envisaged.

Modalities

Setting-up

1. The establishment of offices in Mongu/Limulunga and Birmingham, UK to co-ordinate activities and administration.
2. The canvassing of support, participation and advice from authoritative agencies connected with Western Province, Zambia, in the first instance, the national and local government of the Republic of Zambia and the Barotse Royal establishment.
3. The creation of a registered charity in the UK under the umbrella Africa Information Centre (AIC).
4. The establishment of ongoing fundraising activities and technical assistance in the developed world.

Communications

1. The establishment of a website and e-mailing facilities.

This is already in hand and the following domain names have already been purchased: www.barotseland.com, www.barotseland.org and www.barotseland.net A putative website has already been written and this is now being tested and put forward for appraisal to the interested stakeholders.

2. The setting up of links and networking with other organisations involved with similar activities in Africa and other parts of the world for the purpose of sharing knowledge and experience.
3. The setting up of appropriate links in the academic world in order to publish articles and monitor new thinking in the development field, particularly in the field of communications.

A starting point here would be the Universities of the West Midlands where the UK office would be based. In Zambia and in Western Province, the good offices of the University of Zambia and in particular, the Institute for economic and Social Research will be sought.

4. The dissemination of information and activities through the media, both local and international.

Included under this heading are, in Zambia, local newspapers, magazines and radio and internationally, radio, TV and journals.

Keywords and phrases

Self-sufficiency

Sustainability

Self-help

Community initiatives

Interlinking

Networking

Apolitical

Gendered dimensions

Raising awareness