

ZIMBABWE

The Government of Zimbabwe does not identify any specific group as indigenous, arguing that all black Zimbabweans are indigenous peoples. However, among the black Zimbabwean groups, the people who identify themselves as indigenous peoples are the San peoples who live in Tsholotsho and Bullilima Districts on the edges of South-Western Zimbabwe, adjacent to the Botswana – Zimbabwe boundary. The San in Zimbabwe were traditionally semi-nomadic hunter gatherers but the majority have now become small-scale communal farmers. The San are part of the estimated 14% minority groups in Zimbabwe and they constitute about 0.1% of the total Zimbabwean population. Major international organizations documenting minority and indigenous peoples, however, have neither documentation nor statistics on the San peoples of Zimbabwe.

The San in Zimbabwe consist mainly of Tsharatshawo language speakers. Major challenges faced by the San include discrimination, language rights, control over land, poor service delivery, cultural assimilation, lack of political and traditional representation as well as exclusion.

At the moment, Zimbabwe does not have any specific legislation governing indigenous or minority peoples. However, the new Draft Constitution seeks to recognize the San language as one of the official languages. Zimbabwe voted in favor of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007.

Constitutional and legislative recognition

The Zimbabwean Constitution has no provisions for and does not recognize the San people. The current constitution does not even recognize the San language as an official language. However, the 2012 Draft Constitution recognizes the Khoisan language as one of 16 official languages in the country (Section 1.6:1 of the 2012 Draft Constitution).¹

Section 62:1-3 of the Education Act² stipulates that children below grade 3 should be taught in either Shona or IsiNdebele as the medium of instruction. The use of other languages in schools is left to the discretion of the Minister of Education, as Section 62:4 says that, in the case of minority languages, the Minister may prescribe the use of such languages in schools where the general community uses the minority language.

Zimbabwe is poor in transposing international laws and obligations. Although the country signs and accepts many international instruments, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, there is no political will to ensure that such provisions are transposed into national law, policies and programmes.

Although the Zimbabwean Inclusive Government adopted the Human Rights Act in 2012 and subsequently established the Human Rights Commission, the Commission has not yet become operational owing to “financial and technical constraints”.

Representation

The San in Zimbabwe are grossly underrepresented at traditional, political and technical levels. Traditionally, the San only have Village Heads who are in the lower strata of traditional leadership. Efforts on the part of the San to have a San Headman and Chief have been fruitless as government officials have not been cooperative. Politically, the San have not had any of their leaders/activists elected to public office in Ward Development Committees, or as councillors. Technically, due to a lack of education, the San have none of their people employed in any government or decision-making position.

Such lack of representation has ensured that the San do not develop on a par with other communities and their interests are not taken into account at the decision-making level.

Service delivery

Service delivery in Zimbabwe’s rural communities is generally very poor. The situation is highly critical in the San communities as children travel 8-10 kilometres to



school. This has resulted in most San children dropping out of school before grade 7. Unpublished research by the NGO, Tsoro-o-tso San Development Trust, revealed that in 2011 there was only one San child in grade 7, four in grade 6 and only three at secondary school in Zimbabwe. The research also established that there are generally high numbers of San children in grades 1-3 and that the numbers drop drastically from grade 4 upwards. This is mainly attributed to the long distances travelled to school, high levels of discrimination and exclusion in schools and high poverty levels.

San people generally have to travel about 20 kilometres to the nearest clinic and 80 kilometres to the nearest government hospital.

Access to clean water is also a major factor affecting the San peoples. For example, in one ward where the San live, there are eight boreholes but only two are functional. People have to resort to open dam water for drinking, which they share with wild and domestic animals. During the dry months of August to December, most San people have to abandon their homes and settle in the bushes close to the Hwange National Park in search of water sources. Some have to travel 15 kilometres to access water. An incident of this kind was published in

Minority Voices³ where it was stated that, in November 2012, due to the continuing drought situation in Matabeleland, the dams that were used by the San people had totally dried up, leaving them no option but to settle in the bush along the banks of Manzamyama River, some 20 to 30 km away.⁴

Community-led initiatives

Tsoro-o-tso San Development Trust

Community leaders established the Tsoro-o-tso San Development Trust, an organization that seeks to empower the indigenous, highly marginalized and discriminated San people in Matabeleland to advocate for their rights and other critical issues affecting them through advocacy, research, capacity building and information dissemination. Through this organization, the San have lobbied government ministers such as the Minister in the Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Re-integration. The community has also involved the inclusive government's Joint Operations, Monitoring and Implementation Committee, established under article 22 of the Global Political Agreement,⁵ on issues of political violence and intimidation against San activists/leaders, such as when the San chairperson was threatened by ZANU PF Tsholotsho District members for advancing San issues, claiming that by doing so he "brings MDC people into the community". The organization also advocates for San representation in decision-making, natural resource management and discrimination processes.

Early Childhood Development and Adult Literacy Centre

In 2012, the community also initiated a communal Early Childhood Development and Adult Literacy Centre aimed at promoting the cultural and educational needs of the San peoples.

San Language Project

Since 2011, the San have been initiating a project to revive and promote their language as there are currently only ten people who can speak the San language fluently. The project also seeks to ensure that, by 2014, there will be books in the San language and, by 2015, the San language will be taught in schools up to grade 3.

Conclusion

The San people have been re-organizing and asserting themselves over the past year. They have established an institution to pursue their issues, lobbied government and district officials and initiated self-determination projects that will ensure that children can access education, that the community can access health services and adequate water and have control over their resources. The initiatives also ensure that all forms of discrimination against San women and youths are addressed. ○

Notes and references

- 1 The draft Constitution can be found on this website: http://www.copac.org.zw/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&id=7&Itemid=154
- 2 The Education Act (2005) can be found on this website: http://www.parlzim.gov.zw/attachments/article/112/EDUCATION_ACT_25_04.pdf
- 3 www.minorityvoices.org
- 4 <http://www.minorityvoices.org/news.php/en/1309/zimbabwe-san-people-forced-to-abandon-their-homes-in-search-of-water>
- 5 The Global Political Agreement can be found on this website: http://www.copac.org.zw/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19&Itemid=128

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