

Greetings from Zimbabwe

by Steve Ryman

This article was written the third week of April 2008, before election results had been officially released in Zimbabwe.

A few months ago, my friends at Kufunda Learning Village in Zimbabwe asked me to come and help them have conversations about making and keeping commitments and about accountability within the village. However, the nature of the conversation has shifted as a result of the current political situation in the country. It has now been three weeks since the national elections, and the government has not released the results. The ruling party has said that a runoff election is necessary, but has not established the date for another election even though the law says that it needs to happen within 21 days of the original election.

From all indications, the ruling party has been defeated after 28 years in power, but they are not letting go of power. Instead, they are increasing the intimidation in areas of opposition strength. Foreign journalists are banned in much of the country and so news is largely the result of informal networks. One such report came from a friend on April 19:

Cell phone messages came in by 6.30 am. 150 people have been arrested by the army and are being held in Harare central, 200 people turned up at Mutare hospital, beaten. Beatings in Kambuzuma Chipinge, Gutu, Karoi, Murewa—the army is out looking for those who voted against Mugabe.

The beatings are terrible—stories of deaths begin to come in.

The hospitals are full.

The skeleton staff stretched beyond their capacity

April 19th was Zimbabwe's Independence Day and security was exceptionally high. A friend of mine reports that everyone on the roads was being searched, and he was arrested and detained for several hours for not having a receipt for the goods he was carrying. The level of fear is very high everywhere.

Everyone is exhausted and often close to tears. There were high hopes that a change of government would come from this election. Despite past voting fraud, there was real hope that this time the will of the voters would prevail. While hopes have been dashed,

the patience of the people has not been depleted. Again and again, I hear people say, "We Zimbabweans are peaceful people and we won't follow the examples of South Africa or Kenya." Instead, they just courageously go on about their lives while acknowledging that they are in the midst of a mighty power struggle.

Will the old power structures of patronage and intimidation and brute force persist, or is there the possibility for power to be granted to the people? Is there a possibility that the systems of governance and power can change without violence? These questions seem to be alive for so many people as they go about their daily lives patiently refusing to strike back at the abuse of power.

And the daily lives in this country have changed so much since my last visit in February 2007. There is no food in the stores. Over 80 percent of the population is unemployed and most businesses are closed. The inflation rate is officially 100,500 percent annually but is thought by many economists to be over 400,000 percent. This means that when my friends at Kufunda get paid their monthly salary of \$42 (US equivalent) and it takes a few days to get the money out of the bank and spent for their essentials, the value of their salaries will have dropped by half. What they don't spend immediately will be worthless by the time they are paid again in a month. And the cost of food here is not cheap. I exchanged \$30 US for 1.5 billion Zim dollars and spent almost all of it to buy the very basics to prepare my breakfasts and lunches for two weeks. The economic system is in total collapse, and this means people are unable to eat and unable to pay the school fees for their children.

And in the midst of this, Kufunda Village is like a small oasis. I have been totally amazed by the changes that I see since my first visit in 2006. There is now a beautiful permaculture garden supplying vegetables for community lunches where there used to be a parking lot. Solar power is now allowing internet connection even during the daily and extended periods without electricity. A new pre-school is buzzing with activity and learning for many young orphans. An herbal clinic has opened and is seeing patients daily from the community and dispensing inexpensive herbal remedies for the many symptoms of HIV/AIDS. The community is learning to grow mushrooms and is building a small plant to extract oil from fragrant and medicinal plants for sale. The dojo is active each morning and afternoon with adult and youth practitioners who want to learn aikido as an alternative to violence. Everywhere I look there are new signs of life and hope.

And powerful conversations are happening here that connect the individual and organizational issues to the national political situation. They are talking about power and its place in the community and in relationships. What is the basis of power? How can it

be used legitimately? What does it mean to be empowered and how is that different from a culture of patronage and entitlements? What does it mean to live with integrity and how does this create power? What are the ways in which I give my power away and at what cost? What do we do when power is abused or when commitments are not honored? How can we build a community and an organization based upon a different model of power and how can that transform other communities?

Something new and alive is emerging here; new possibilities are sprouting with the winter vegetables. I cannot state strongly enough the courage that I experience and what a tremendous honor it is to stand beside these peaceful warriors as they engage in such profound conversations. When I tell them that the world is watching and wants to support the nonviolent changes, I see their eyes tear up and hear immense gratitude expressed.

But, I fear that words and chocolate and the other gifts that I have brought from supportive friends will not be enough. I watch the stress that people are feeling from the economic collapse and from the daily challenge to feed their children, and I wonder how much longer they can continue to be patient and peaceful and where they will find the energy to continue the conversations about the kind of community they want to develop. When I hear activists talking about their inability to sleep at night and the years that they have aged in the past month, I wonder how long they can keep going.

At Kufunda, I also see the financial stress taking its toll. Will the organization be able to survive the hyper-inflation, economic collapse and political uncertainty for those tender sprouts of hope and possibility to blossom? There is a strong desire to change the culture and economy within the village from gifts and entitlements to investments and business development. Gifts are being invested in projects that will be self-sustaining and that will allow people to make a life for themselves when the government and the economy change. And I see hopeful signs in a new local currency that is being implemented by Kufunda in the surrounding farming community; an alternative currency that will be based on real work and real products and thus be protected from inflation.

The infrastructure for a new economy is being built, but can it survive until the economy and political systems change? For it to do so, Kufunda must begin paying the member/workers a better salary. The current \$42 US per month is not adequate, especially when it is paid in Zim dollars. An agreement has been made to increase the monthly salaries and to begin using the alternative currency for part of the salary. This decision has been made with the recognition that Kufunda does not have the money to continue doing so for more than a few months without increased support. So, I am asking for help from anyone who can. A monthly contribution of even \$10 would make the

difference for one of the Kufunda families to continue the important work of community building. I see such a contribution as being a way to buy time until things change here, and I trust the patient hope that things will change.

If you are like me, you are overwhelmed by requests for help and I don't blame you for tuning this out. However, if you are like me, you would like your contributions to make a difference, and it's so hard to know where to give. Having been here at Kufunda, I have seen what a difference a little money can make. I can vouch that contributions are wisely invested at Kufunda and are needed very badly right now. If you are able and willing to help, it is very easy to make a tax-deductible contribution through The Berkana Institute. You can mail a check to Berkana at 350 East Tenth Avenue, Spokane, WA 99202 USA, or you can contribute with a credit card on-line by [clicking here](#). Please identify Kufunda as the recipient on each donation so Berkana will send it here.

Thanks for your interest and for your support in so many ways. I would not be here if it were not for the emotional support and encouragement of so many people.