
ZAMBIA: Spotlight on education and health research

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In recent updates to parliament, lawmakers heard of plans to strengthen mathematics and science education, that construction work on Zambia's most prestigious university had remained unfinished for 45 years, and that government was funding collaborative research with a South African institute on testing traditional HIV-Aids medicines.

Education Deputy Minister Clement Sinyinda told parliament on 24 July that maths and science education was under threat. With the total number of maths teachers in the country standing at 1,312 and science teachers at 1,570, and with teacher-pupil ratios at 1:202 (maths) and 1:169 (science), the teacher shortage had become critical.

"We know that the ideal situation would be one teacher to 35 pupils in a high school, while in a junior secondary school the ideal situation would be one teacher to 40 pupils," said Sinyinda.

The deputy minister outlined a number of steps being taken to improve the situation.

In an attempt to address the shortage by training more teachers, the ministry is constructing a dedicated science and maths institution of higher learning, Mulakupikwa University College. Government is also upgrading Nkrumah Teacher Training College and the Copperbelt College of Education.

The country's second largest state-run university, Copperbelt University, has started a science and maths teacher training programme, and Sinyinda told the assembly that government had directed authorities at the university to admit more students for training in science and maths teaching.

Earlier this year, government announced that it had put in place plans to upgrade 6,500 teachers from diploma to degree level and was discarding certificates in favour of diplomas as the minimum educational qualification for the country's teachers.

During the same legislative assembly session parliamentarians were clearly baffled when the education deputy minister reported that construction work on the country's oldest university, the University of Zambia, started in 1965 at independence from Britain, had yet to be completed.

The reason given was that the Israeli contractors engaged to carry out the work had pulled out following "some political changes in the relationship" with the leadership of the country at the time, under former president Kenneth Kaunda.

Sinyinda explained that government had been unable to locate the original building plans and that in the absence of such documents it was not possible to quantify the extent to which the builders had or had not complied with the contract.

He pointed out though that a simple process of observation clarified "that the structures were not completed, as staircases can be seen hanging while certain doorframes have been blocked".

The revelations came at a time when Vice-chancellor Professor Stephen Simukanga told the university's 40th graduation ceremony that one of the major challenges it faced was limited infrastructure, resulting in overcrowding. Simukanga said currently the university had 3,432 bed spaces for some 10,000 full-time students.

Also during the same parliamentary session, Health Minister Kapembwa Simbao reported that the government had committed US\$56,000 to research aimed at ascertaining whether eight local traditional medicines could cure HIV-Aids.

He added that some of the researchers had progressed to the point of making their products available in capsule form, in a country where he claimed between 60% and 70% of people consulted traditional healers before visiting health facilities.

The health minister explained that the government was most interested in two of the products: one known as the Sondashi Formula and another called Mailacyn. While neither had been proved to cure HIV-Aids, both had been subjected to tests in collaboration with the Southern African Network for Biosciences Research Institute in South Africa, and had been found to have immune-boosting abilities.

"For this reason, they can be taken, even though they have not yet shown that they can cure HIV-Aids," Simbao said.