

THE IRISH TIMES

Zimbabwe needs support not abandonment

International aid is a lifeline for the people of Zimbabwe; they must not be abandoned, writes **Festo Kavishe**.

This week's *Irish Times* article "Aid groups increase misery if they prolong Mugabe's tyrannical regime" is an over-simplified knee-jerk reaction to Zimbabwe and shows a lack of understanding of the world of developmental aid. More critically, it is potentially damaging to millions of people who, now more than ever, look to all manner of aid agencies for survival.

The idea that international aid is "propping up the ailing regime" is flawed in three ways.

First, your writer simplifies "aid" to mean food, whereas in fact at present most aid to Zimbabwe comes in the form of life-saving vaccines for children, educational support, caring for orphans, malaria control and training Zimbabwean volunteers to look after those in their communities with HIV/Aids.

Second, the article misses the critical fact that much aid comes into Zimbabwe direct to communities, and not through government.

And finally, it assumes that by denying children and women vaccines and other life-saving support, and in effect by abandoning the country's one million orphans, Zimbabweans - already on their knees - will somehow rise up and overthrow their government.

I have looked, but cannot find a historical precedent of this.

At this very moment, Zimbabweans are suffering from drought, economic decline, the world's fourth-highest rate of HIV, and the highest increases of child mortality in the world.

And yet despite this, the article advocates that Zimbabweans rise up against a government, even though

it acknowledges there is no regional support for this action. And if they do not rise up, then from the safety of a desk in Dublin or Johannesburg, the article advocates that international donors should starve them into action.

That is a terrifying position to take, and comes at a time when I had hoped the world would have moved beyond thinking there was any justified "higher purpose" in enforced starvation or sanctioning children.

Meanwhile, as Live8 launches across the world, we are awash with positive examples of where aid does work. It may not get airplay, but perhaps few programmes are more successful than school feeding in Zimbabwe, which has produced both a robust decline in malnutrition numbers, and an increase in girls staying at school. There are myriad more examples like this in Zimbabwe. They need greater support, not abandonment.

As an African who has lived in Zimbabwe for the past four years, I shudder to think of the faces of Zimbabweans when all NGOs and the UN tell them our latest means of protesting about the government is simply to walk out and desert them.

Good governance can only be achieved if both the citizenry and the government are engaged. And you can engage both through creative, targeted, community-level investment in basic services.

Donors are right to be concerned about governance and human rights in Zimbabwe, as they would anywhere else. But by withholding desperately needed support for basic health care and education, they are also missing an opportunity to engage at grassroots level.

We know Zimbabwe is not the most favoured nation for donor assistance, though it is hard to explain to these gentle, educated and resolute people why they are paying the price for their country's politics.

In southern Africa, the area most devastated by HIV/Aids, the average annual donor-spending-per-HIV-infected-person among the major global initiatives is \$74 (€61.2). In Zambia, a country with slightly lower HIV rates than Zimbabwe, donors give \$187 per HIV-positive person; in

Namibia \$101, and in Uganda \$319. The figure per HIV-positive Zimbabwean is just \$4.

And this past fortnight - amid a government operation to "clean up" cities - 400,000 people have been made homeless. The actions will no doubt further the resolve of the international community to isolate Zimbabwe. But I met one of these people - a grandmother who in 1999 was advised by a leading bank to build and lease out small outhouses at her property so as to generate income to put her four orphaned grandchildren through school. These structures were destroyed last week. She too is looking to the international community for help.

Thankfully, help is coming. This week Unicef in Ireland became the first international donor to offer help to those Zimbabweans who have lost their homes and livelihoods in the depths of winter.

"I understand the reservations donors may have about the political situation in Zimbabwe, but this is not a reason for letting children suffer by refusing to support vital life-saving programmes to help them," said Unicef's executive director in Ireland, Maura Quinn. "We hope the international community will not continue to put concerns about government policy in Zimbabwe above the urgent necessity for an immediate response to this escalating humanitarian tragedy for children and women."

Suffering and neglect are fresh in the collective memory of the Irish. Your country's fortunes have changed and you can now share that good fortune. As someone who sees and who knows the very Zimbabweans Ireland is now supporting, I can only say, a heartfelt "Thank you Ireland", thank you for understanding.

Dr Festo Kavishe is the Unicef representative in Zimbabwe