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## STATEMENT ON THE HANDOVER OF RURAL DAY SCHOOLS FROM COUNCILS TO CHURCHES



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Churches have contributed tremendously to the development of the Zimbabwean education sector. Before independence, most rural schools that provided education for black students were developed and run by churches through missionary centres. Those mission schools only received a fraction of the grants given to white schools by the colonial government. In the 1970s, the Rhodesian regime withdrew any financial support from mission schools and promoted the handover of rural day schools to local councils, which often lacked a sufficient revenue base and therefore struggled to fulfil their mandate to provide education for black students.

After independence, the Zimbabwean Government addressed the challenges emanating from a racially segregated education system by launching its *Education for All* policy. The Government declared the right to primary education, abolished primary school tuition fees, provided for teachers' salaries and rapidly increased funding for construction, maintenance and operation of council schools through the Ministry of Education. Parents and communities often supported the development of local schools through voluntary work, provision of materials and subsequent payment of school development levies. Still, the development and maintenance of school infrastructure and the provision of learning tools and materials gradually became a financial challenge for the Government.

With the structural adjustment and decentralisation policies in the 1990s, the Government devolved financial responsibilities for rural day schools to the local authorities and parent communities. Due to deepening economic challenges in the new millennium, councils and parents have been finding it increasingly difficult to support rural day schools adequately. The Government reduced and at times stopped providing per capita grants, while at the same time government agencies obtained some of the local authorities' revenue base, such as vehicle licensing and liquor licensing. Consequently, in the last years some Rural District Councils tried to cut their own costs by inviting interested churches to take over and once again run rural day schools.

Considering the many positive contributions from churches to providing education in Zimbabwe, the handover of council schools to churches is often expected to have a very positive impact on school development. However, in some instances the handover has led to challenges and conflicts about school ownership and governance between the new school authorities on the one side, and school heads, teachers, communities, parents and councils on the other side. During conflict interventions and consultations in the Midlands Province, CCMT has recognized the following conflict issues:

- In rural areas, schools are often social and cultural centres. Communities feel a strong sense of ownership of local schools and sometimes contest the handover, because they supported the school development in line with the government's *Education for All* policy and through paying levies. Communities expect to have a voice in the handover and running of the schools, which can lead to conflicts with councils and the new school authorities. The conflicts are often aggravated by efforts of church authorities to gain control of the School Development Committees, which administer the levies.
- The handover of council schools to churches in many instances generates unrealistic expectations by communities and councils, because they compare them with the few remaining and very successful mission schools, which are usually privately owned and managed boarding schools. Since churches often fail to provide the same outstanding development for rural day

schools, some parents become reluctant to pay school development levies. Such conflicts between parents and school authorities result in the degradation of the learning environment due to lack of sufficient resources.

- In many cases, it remains unclear, what exactly the handover of council schools entails: Does the transfer include land, buildings, movable and immovable assets or just the mandate to operate schools? The lack of clear mandates and guidelines fosters conflicts between councils and churches about ownership and responsibilities.
- Council schools employ teachers, who are recruited by the Public Service Commission, get paid by the Ministry of Education and must comply with the code of conduct for civil servants. Churches that take over council schools on the other side often introduce additional church regulations to govern teachers' ethical, dress and general conduct, which not all teachers subscribe to. The resulting conflicts between teachers or school heads and the new school authorities often demotivate staff and have a negative impact on the provision of education.
- After taking over council schools, some churches ban certain cultural practices and introduce their own religious doctrines, teachings and practices, while seeking to enforce them on all children regardless of their family traditions or religious inclinations. Some parents resist what they regard as religious interference and fear discrimination of their children. This becomes a source of conflict, because unlike urban or private schools, rural day schools are rarely schools of choice. In most cases, parents and children do not have access to alternative educational facilities within a reasonable distance. In such cases, the insistence on religious compliance may infringe on children's right to education in terms of accessibility and acceptability.

As CCMT, we are concerned about the negative impact those conflicts have on education and the relations between local authorities, teachers, churches and communities. We strongly believe that none of the conflict parties are at fault and that the conflicts are driven by lack of clear regulations to guide the process of handing over council schools to churches or other interested parties. Therefore, we call upon the responsible authorities and interested stakeholders to jointly develop policies and guidelines addressing the conflict issues. We recommend consideration of the following provisions:

- Communities and parents should be thoroughly informed, consulted and involved in the decision-making on the handover of council schools. Parents should also continue to have a voice in the subsequent governance of the schools.
- The handover of council schools should be guided by comprehensive, transparent and (if applicable) time-bound agreements, which clearly outline the purpose, principles and scope of the handover of council schools as well as the mandates, roles and responsibilities of all parties involved. The prospective new school authorities should negotiate and work out detailed administration guidelines as well as development and funding plans, which become binding parts of the agreements.
- The agreements should ensure that the public right to education takes precedence over the churches' interest of religious compliance, and suggest appropriate arbitration mechanisms. If parents and children do not have access to alternative affordable and culturally acceptable schools within a reasonable distance, they should not be subjected to religious teachings, church doctrines and practices, unless they voluntarily choose to do so.

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