

23rd July 2010, Epworth - Simbarashe Choga, 65, a retired teacher, is the local butcher in Epworth, some 20km northeast of Zimbabwe's capital, Harare; he is also the principal of the primary school he runs out of his shop.

"My teachers keep their records and other materials at my butchery, which operates as our head office because, as you can see, there are no buildings here," Choga told IRIN. "We have a total enrolment of 182 pupils from the first to the seventh grades, and the majority of them learn outside."

Most of the houses in Epworth have no running water or electricity and the area is best known for its high levels of crime. Choga insisted that his institution had been registered by the local municipal authority, but said most of the schools offering primary and secondary education were unlicensed, and at the ministerial level even his school was not accredited.

This means that pupils at Choga's school have to sit their grade-seven examinations for entry into high school at other institutions that have been formally licensed by the education ministry.

Choga, who employs mostly untrained teachers, complained that they had to make do with inadequate books and stationery, and urged the government to register his school, "so that people like myself, and many others in Epworth and other parts of the country, can make education accessible to the underprivileged, who are too poor and lack learning facilities."

Good marks, for now

The United Nations Development Programme recently found that Zimbabwe had a literacy rate of 92 percent - the highest in Africa - but David Coltart, minister of education, arts, sport and culture, commented: "That hardly means anything if Zimbabwe's education system remains in the state it is today. I am not accepting congratulations."

The ailing education system, once a model for sub-Saharan Africa, has buckled and all but collapsed under the economic and political crises of the past decade, when widespread food shortages, hyperinflation, cholera outbreaks, and an almost year-long strike by teachers in 2008 led to a dramatic decline in the standard of learning.

It is not uncommon for 10 pupils to share a textbook, and although the government drastically slashed school fees in 2009, deepening poverty has put even the reduced cost of attending government schools in some areas beyond the reach of thousands of children.

"The proliferation of these unregistered schools is a national crisis, and we are very worried," Coltart told IRIN. He said unauthorized schools were multiplying because limited resources meant education officials could not check on them.

"There are no vehicles to use to visit districts and inspect the schools, as was the case when the economy was still sound. I am, however, happy that the finance minister [Tendai Biti]

recently allocated my ministry money to buy 40 vehicles to use during our tours across the country."

Coltart said even though private schools played an important role in raising educational standards, this was not the case where the institutions were unregistered and were not monitored by officials from his ministry. The government recently announced that it had closed more than 100 unlicensed private tertiary colleges.

"Students going into their fourth form have to go elsewhere, as we are also not registered and cannot conduct Ordinary Level examinations. Fees are cheap here, and the parents enrol their children with us because they cannot be absorbed by the few secondary schools in the area," said Sophia Sibanda, a teacher at a school near Choga's.

"The most important thing is that these pupils know how to read and write, and get a little knowledge about geography and history," she said. "Otherwise they would get into adulthood without being able to count."

Source: allAfrica.com