



[Zimbabwe: a problem for Britain to solve?](#)

by **[Georgina Kirk](#)**

The country now known as Zimbabwe was once a proud, prosperous, peaceful nation, where different tribes and races rubbed along in relative harmony and where, with insufficient business to warrant more, Parliament sat for a total of three months a year.

These days, Zimbabwe is a catastrophe of corruption, incompetence, violence, repression and poverty. Since there is a case for saying Britain is largely responsible for bringing about both the above situations, does it follow that Britain has a moral obligation to help Zimbabwe out of its current dire state?

Having sold the Rhodesians down the Zambezi, do we owe it to the Zimbabweans to atone for our mistakes? Or, after the mess we made of it all, should we butt out and let the Zimbabweans solve their own problems in their own way?

Here is my brief assessment of the options:

Military intervention

It's not as if Britain never gets involved in other countries' conflicts. In many cases, this is in order to combat a threat to our safety or our economic interests, but sometimes it's simply that our government believes it's the right thing to do. An example of the latter is our intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000, which played a crucial part in ending their 10-year civil war. This former British colony, independent since 1961, was being ravaged by destructive forces and the erstwhile imperial power stepped in to help. What is the difference in Zimbabwe?

However, Britain imposing regime change on Zimbabwe could be seen as hypocritical on many levels. For a start, armed insurrection is undemocratic and in conflict with the ideals the West is supposed to adhere to, the sort of behaviour we condemn when the Africans do it. And let's not gloss over our own part in Mugabe's rise to power. Robert Mugabe would not be where he is today if successive British governments had not spent so much time, energy and money supporting the black nationalists at the expense of the black chiefs who had been the tribal leaders and were far better placed to take over the reins of government. To oust the President on the grounds we backed the wrong horse and allowed it to win seems somewhat capricious – not to say outrageous, from six thousand miles away.

Aid and charity



The British Foreign Office is debating whether to join the European Union in reinstating state aid directly to the government of Zimbabwe. Since 2009, when Mugabe reluctantly agreed to share a degree of power with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), donor nations have become more inclined to support the country's Government of National Unity. While there are clear signs the Zimbabwean economy is improving, under the stewardship of the MDC Finance Minister, the poverty in which huge swathes of the population are living is shocking.

Currently, Britain is giving around £88 million a year to various projects in Zimbabwe, channelled through NGOs and other organisations. Particularly in view of our historical ties, this seems the least we can do to help a nation that is struggling so horribly. Doesn't it? Certainly it's got to be better than pouring funds into the government coffers but, as with all aid projects run by Westerners for the benefit of developing countries, the big question is whether what's being provided is actually what the local people want and not what we think they should want. In his book *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*, Rhodesian-born journalist Peter Godwin says:

"It's always instructive to observe the life-cycle of the First World aid-worker. A wary enthusiasm

blooms into an almost messianic sense of what might be possible. Then, as they bump up against the local cultural limits of acceptable change, comes the inevitable disappointment, which can harden into cynicism and even racism, until they are no better than the resident whites they have initially disparaged.”

When one remembers the thriving agricultural industry the country used to have, as well as the enviable mineral resources with which it is blessed, it's a sad indictment of Mugabe's administration that Zimbabwe has descended to the status of a third-world, 'developing' nation. Far from receiving Western hand-outs, if properly run Zimbabwe would be in a position to assist its struggling neighbours.

Political assistance

In 2002, in the wake of the violent seizures of white farmers' properties, Britain and other countries imposed sanctions on Mugabe himself and a hundred or so other ZANU-PF politicians, officials, businessmen and military leaders. These prohibit them from visiting the countries in question and freeze any assets they have in those countries' banks. In 2003, Zimbabwe was expelled from the Commonwealth. Now, Britain is leading the way to the lifting of sanctions from the majority of those blacklisted – though not from Mugabe or his inner circle – and there is talk of Zimbabwe being readmitted to the Commonwealth. Sanctions will be lifted on condition that a 'credible' referendum take place on the content of Zimbabwe's new constitution.

There are two questions here. The first is whether sanctions were actually working. They were imposed as a gesture to make clear Britain's strong disapproval of the terrorist tactics used by Mugabe and his henchpeople but it's hard to say whether they were taken very seriously by those targeted. In public, at least, they scoff at the idea they might want to visit Britain even if they were welcome. Of more consequence to the Zimbabwean people, Mugabe uses these sanctions as an excuse for the nose-dive their economy took as a result of his policies.

The second question concerns the string attached to the lifting of sanctions, the referendum. One could argue this condition falls between two stools and may in truth be more about our need to be seen to be getting something in return than about achieving something useful for Zimbabwe. Stool one is a free and fair election, which is much more important than the referendum; stool two is nothing, no conditions, which has the advantage of being unequivocal – unlike the credibility of a referendum.

The MDC wants the sanctions lifted and their country back in the Commonwealth and they are the ones there on the ground. While it might seem distasteful to withdraw the symbol of our disapproval of this murderous regime, it is probably in the best interest of its victims to do so.

Some useful background readings

[New imperialism in Sierra Leone](#) *The Guardian*, 14 May 2002

[Zimbabwe: how we aid profligacy](#) *The Telegraph*, 20 February 2012

[We must have the courage to bring Zimbabwe in from the cold](#) *The Telegraph*, 18 July 2012