

Unilever tackles socio-economic challenges

As the investor community converged in Lusaka recently to participate in the fifth Zambia International Investment Forum (ZIIF) 2016, pertinent conversations on industrialisation, wealth and job creation were discussed. A lot of focus went into constructive conversations on how to make Zambia a better country, socio-economically.

By [Sibonile Dube](#) 6 May 2016



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At the event, Unilever Zambia launched the 'Blue Band Growth Challenge', to tackle under-nutrition and make a positive contribution to a balanced and healthy diet for children. This left participants and investors on a high, looking forward to the next year's forum. Already, potential discussions for ZIIF 2017 come to mind, such as creating opportunities for women in order to establish an inclusive economy for Zambia.

Former UN Secretary-General and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Kofi Annan, has been quoted as saying "There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women." Research shows that women reinvest 90% of their earned income into their families (compared to 30-40% among men). Women's inclusion in the economic cycle therefore, has a magnifying positive impact on growth and on the health and progress of their families and communities.

In many societies, particularly those in the developing world, women have always been a catalyst for positive change in their communities. Investing in cross-cutting issues such as the health, education, economic growth and equality of women and girls has ripple effect positive outcomes for societies. According to a USAID report published in 2011, when 10% more girls go to school, a country's GDP increases by an average of 3%.

Nothing can be more effective in shaping a country's economic fortune as investing in its women and girls. However, many countries have not recognised the amount of work that still needs to be done to create an enabling environment for them to flourish. This requires the collaborative effort of government, industry and civic society.

The government of Zambia has committed itself to attaining gender equity and equality via socio-economic

development processes espoused in its “Vision 2030.” In 2000, Zambia adopted the National Gender Policy in order to build capacity in supporting this agenda. This policy is aligned to the United Nations Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Being party to such agreements assists in ensuring a country does not lose sight of the importance of creating an inclusive economy that embraces the economic participation of its women.

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Government has a critical role to play in increasing literacy levels in a country. This is the key to unlocking health, nutrition and education in communities. Investing in these cross-cutting elements creates a ripple effect of positive outcomes in any society. As such, the relevant stakeholders in Zambia must focus on improving the literacy levels of its females so as to increase economic performance based on the opportunities created for women and girls.

A 2012 research done by UNICEF in Zambia indicates that in the 15-24 age group, literacy levels in Zambia were at 70% amongst males and at 58.5% amongst females. The opportunities made available to young females in Zambia now, have the power to shape the future of their lives and those around them. This therefore is a call to action to people with high level decision making powers to address the gender gaps that still prevails in the country.

Industry also has a key role to play in creating an inclusive economy in any country. Amongst the first time participants at this year’s ZIIF is Anglo-Dutch FMCG giant, Unilever. The company is amongst the industry representatives that actively participated in the formulation of the Global Goals for Sustainable Development which includes ‘goal number five’ which promotes Gender Equality.

Over 70% of the people making the decision to purchase Unilever brands globally are women. This makes it important to meet their needs and aspirations. Furthermore, it is critical that the company increasingly improves their livelihoods to ensure they formally participate in the economy.

In 2014 Unilever strengthened its Enhancing Livelihoods ambitions of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) by creating a new pillar on ‘Opportunities for Women’ with a focus on their economic empowerment based on rights, skills and opportunities. Unilever’s ambition is to empower 5 million women globally by 2020. Women also play a central role across Unilever’s value chain and this is reflected in the company’s USLP commitments, such as improving hygiene and nutrition and increasing sustainable sourcing.

Unilever continues on the journey of activating a comprehensive strategy to achieve a step-change in women’s empowerment across its business and where the company has influence including valuing and advancing opportunities for women within Unilever to ensure a gender balanced organisation and promoting women’s rights to enable their full and active participation in society.

It is the combined effort of the organisations and institutions that were represented at ZIIF 2016 that will accelerate the participation of women in the economy by having discussions on the right platforms to make it more inclusive.

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