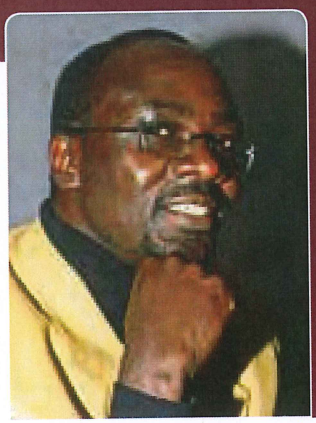
IN CONVERSATION WITH

Peter Kagwanja



Africa–West stand-off:

Zim recovery roadmap under threat

President Thabo Mbeki has a new regional mandate to broker a negotiated settlement to end the debilitating political and economic crisis that is rapidly driving Zimbabwe over the cliff. But the mediation effort runs the risk of failing unless a protracted face-off between Africa and the Western world over South Africa's northern neighbour is resolved, says PETER KAGWANJA.

A DARK CLOUD hung over the recently concluded August 2007 summit of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) leaders in Lusaka, Zambia. This cloud now throws its shadow over the upcoming Euro–Africa summit in Portugal on 8–9 December, and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Uganda later in the year.

The 14-member organisation resolved to put together an economic recovery plan to pull Zimbabwe from the brink. But Western critics are already warning that Africa risks losing heavily for its failure to come down hard on Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF elite.

As Tom Morrison, a former foreign correspondent for Reuters warns: 'Failing... to get to grips with the issue of Zimbabwe, the SADC leaders are seriously undermining Africa's credibility on the world stage...They may get a rude awakening the next time they lobby for a better global deal for their countries on the world stage'.

Since the meltdown began in 2000, the West and Africa have been staring each other down, waiting to see who will blink first. The tension over Zimbabwe is rooted in their diametrically opposed interpretations of the causes of the Zimbabwe crisis.

To the Western world the trouble in Zimbabwe is unreservedly a crisis of leadership and governance, and of the violation of human rights and democracy. From a gallant citizen of the British Empire, honoured by Queen Elizabeth II in 1994 as a Knight of the Order of Bath, and praised by the 'Iron Lady,' Margaret Thatcher, as a 'man I can do business with', Robert Gabriel Mugabe has metamorphosed into the very image of an African dictator. The responsibility for Zimbabwe's woes are heaped on his policies and actions, and Mugabe's exit has become a magic potion routinely prescribed by every Western policy think tank.

Even those Africans who criticise Mugabe for emptying Africa's breadbasket, still hold him in high regard as a liberation hero and Africa's Fidel Castro, a leader who has defied the lone superpower – the United States – as well as its former coloniser – Britain.

While it is probably true that the West must shoulder some responsibility, there is nevertheless no doubt that bad policies have contributed to the crisis which has pushed Zimbabwe's economy to the brink of collapse – with an official inflation rate of 4 500%, nearly 80% unemployment, empty food shelves, dry gas stations, nearly empty state coffers, and collapsed services. Zimbabwe's perilous slide has become a security and economic threat to the entire region, spawning no less than three million refugees, who are straining services in their adopted countries.

But Zimbabwe's real threat to the southern African region is ideological. The Africa–West confrontation has emboldened Mugabe and transformed him into a symbol of African resistance, and a victim of racially inspired retribution for seizing and handing over white farms to black Zimbabweans. As such, he has won allies in the countries of southern Africa, like Namibia, South Africa and Angola, where black people are grappling with historical injustices relating to land, restricted access to services and few economic opportunities.

When the crisis erupted in 2000, the West trained its strategic focus on South Africa as the regional economic, military and political powerhouse, putting it under pressure to break ranks with fellow Africans and openly confront the Mugabe regime.

In the post-9/11 world, dominated by superpower unilateralism and 'coalitions-of-the-willing' who seek to change regimes, South Africa is confronted with two broad policy choices with respect to Zimbabwe:

- **Regime change:** This entails the use of a combination of military force, sanctions and open public criticism; and
- **Regime transformation:** This involves a mix of peer pressure and instruments of soft power – such as mediation and tactical offers of economic carrots – aimed at transforming the body politic and paving the way for a robust democracy.

Pretoria has settled for the soft-power option, which has been parodied as 'quiet diplomacy'. South Africa's response to the Zimbabwe crisis has neither been seamless nor static. The 'quiet diplomacy' phase (2000–2004) yielded a 108-page constitutional draft, but Pretoria lacked the requisite muscle to get the rival parties to implement it.

Since then, quiet diplomacy has died and been buried. South Africa's approach to Zimbabwe has oscillated between applying limited pressure, uncoordinated 'microphone diplomacy' and 'abdicationism' to a do-nothing stance.

Zimbabwe also rejected, on grounds of sovereignty, South Africa's offer of a $500 million credit line enabling it to purchase

fuel, food and to pay off the International Monetary Fund debt so as to avert its imminent expulsion in late 2005. In return Zimbabwe was required to adopt a roadmap for democracy and good governance as well as an economic recovery plan. The fall-out from Zimbabwe's refusal marked the end of Mbeki's bilateral diplomacy and mediation until he was re-appointed as mediator by the SADC in 2007.

Mbeki's current mediation offers the best chance for creating a level playing field ahead of the crucial 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections. While the interim report on the mediation process was presented at the August SADC summit, mediation remains a work in progress and the future is still uncertain. However, the mediation efforts should be supported by Africa and the West.

Adding to Zimbabwe's woes is the stampede to succeeded Mugabe, which is tearing the ruling party apart. Mugabe has in any case declared that he is going to stand in the 2008 elections. Zimbabwe's opposition, whose only chance lies in presenting one candidate, remains too splintered to be a real threat.

The West, including America and EU member states, has imposed asset freezes and travel bans on Mugabe and some hundred of his ZANU-PF colleagues, their spouses and close relatives. Despite the attempt not to hurt ordinary Zimbabweans and to ensure a steady flow of humanitarian assistance, the sanctions and Zimbabwe's isolation have fostered an international climate dangerously unhelpful towards Zimbabwe's economic recovery. The SADC's efforts to revive Zimbabwe's economy have to deal with this reality.

The travel bans threaten to scuttle the long overdue Euro–Africa summit in Lisbon on 8–9 December. The first meeting between Africa's 53 states and the EU was held in 2000 in Egypt. But subsequent meetings have been put off following the imposition of the travel ban on Mugabe, and Britain's strong objection to his presence at the event. As the current holder of the EU Presidency, Portugal has hinted it will invite Zimbabwe to the December summit, attracting severe criticism, particularly from Britain, whose Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, is likely to stay away.

While Africa and the West agree on Zimbabwe's need for economic recovery and an enabling environment for democracy, ending the complex crisis there demands a nuanced approach.

Africa and the West need to back the SADC process in a concerted effort in order to secure constitutional and electoral reforms as well as an economic recovery plan ahead of the 2008 elections. In addition, African liberation leaders like Sam Nujoma and Kenneth Kaunda have a role to play in easing the tensions between the two blocks. They could possibly prevail upon President Mugabe to retire so that a peaceful transition can take place. Despite the efforts by regional leaders to date, the situation in Zimbabwe is still far from resolved. ●

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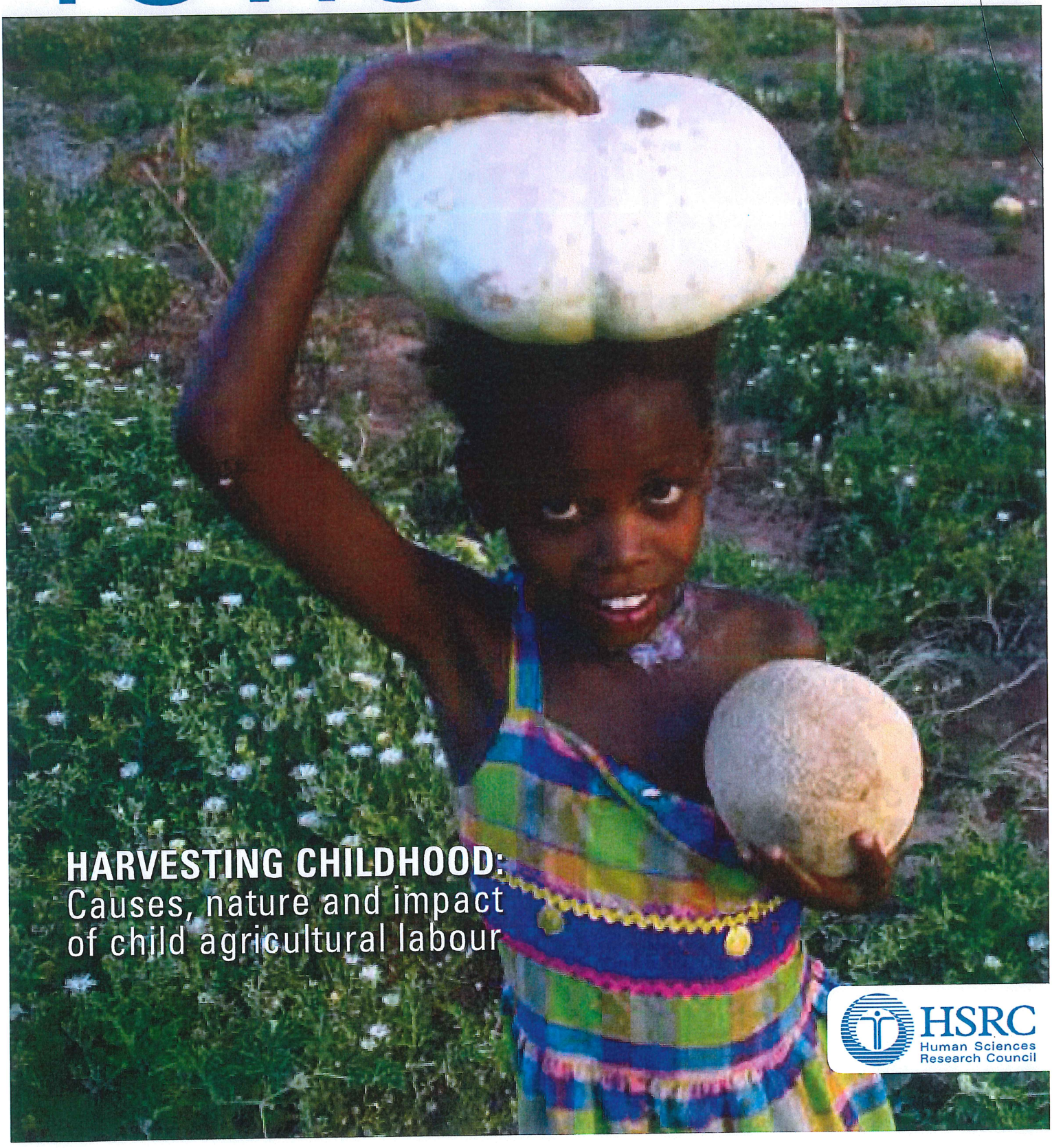

HARVESTING CHILDHOOD:
Causes, nature and impact of child agricultural labour

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