

# CARNEGIE Results

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It highlights Corporation-  
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produced reports,  
results or information  
of special note.

## Looking Back at Zimbabwe

*How a grant aimed at advancing democracy missed the mark*

**T**his is the anatomy of a grant that failed. In October 1999 Carnegie Corporation provided funding of \$200,000 for the Constitutional Commission of Zimbabwe in support of public education and outreach activities, including: 1) educating Zimbabweans about the strengths and weaknesses of the present constitution; 2) informing them about the Commission's work and 3) soliciting their input about the kind of government they wanted their country to have. According to the country's president, Robert Mugabe, the Commission, a task force of 400 citizens, had been set up "to afford the people of Zimbabwe the opportunity to author and found their constitution enshrining freedom, democracy, transparency and good governance." But as anyone who has witnessed the repressive Mugabe regime at work will attest, this opportunity would never materialize.

Why would Carnegie Corporation give a grant to a futile project in a doomed country? Why for that matter do foundations give grants at all? Philanthropic foundations exist primarily to give money away and, in the simplest possible terms, do so to solve problems. Carnegie Corporation founder Andrew Carnegie's vision of philanthropy was "to do real and permanent good in this world." And as Corporation president Vartan Gregorian stresses, the most essential element of successful philanthropy can best be summed up in the word *strategy*.

Foundations such as Carnegie Corporation employ strategic grantmaking to assure that support is used where it will accomplish demonstrable change; formal objectives, timetables and procedures are spelled out and agreed upon in advance. Adhering to these strict criteria is the surest way to keep philanthropy from naively overpromising on its potential. Even so, there's a risk of foundations supporting projects that are long on hope and short on strategy. One relevant example is the Corporation's failed grant toward a new constitution for Zimbabwe.

## An Appeal for Funding

**B**ack in 1997, the troubled nation of Zimbabwe needed to get on the right track. Seventeen years had passed since Robert Mugabe led the fight for liberation and took over the government of the white minority-ruled country. His power had grown steadily through the years and a series of self-serving amendments to Zimbabwe's ad hoc constitution had been put in place to assure this situation would continue. Mugabe and his party, the Zimbabwean African National Union-Patriotic Front, were responsible for a series of disastrous government programs that ruined the economy of the once-

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prosperous land, formerly southern Africa's breadbasket. Reform was long overdue.

As elsewhere in Africa, Zimbabwe's civil society began the process of constitutional reform. The pro-democracy National Constitutional Assembly, made up of church-affiliated groups, human rights advocates, jurists, academics, trade unions, farmers, business groups, political parties and others, initiated the movement — which the Mugabe regime came to see as a threat. To appropriate the increasingly popular reform movement, in May of 1999 the government created the Constitutional Commission of Zimbabwe. Its official mandate called for the new constitution to be completed by the end of November that year (an unrealistic time-frame) and voted on in a referendum in early 2000, putting it in place in time for the upcoming parliamentary elections. It was this government-led reform effort that Carnegie Corporation was asked to support.

By the time the Corporation received this request, a number of prominent funders, eager to back a process that could build the Zimbabwean people's faith in their government, had agreed to help underwrite half the Constitutional Commission's projected budget of \$10.8 million. The United Nations Development Program facilitated support from the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and bilateral funding came from Australia, Canada and South Korea. Significantly, there were also substantial commitments from the Ford and Kellogg Foundations, two institutions Carnegie Corporation often partnered with in philanthropic ventures. The Kellogg Foundation, with a staff of 15 in the regional office in Harare, had a strong interest in seeing Zimbabwe, where they'd been since 1986, open up as was happening in South Africa at the time, according to Gail McClure, vice president of planning and programs. The Foundation considered it a "venture investment," McClure explained, "a chance to educate the people in rural areas where our work was concentrated."

Even with other funders' involvement, no one knew for certain if, at this late stage, any amount of support could impede Mugabe's power grab. Consequently, there were profound disagreements within Carnegie Corporation about whether a grant to the Constitutional Commission would be money well spent. Serious questions went unanswered: Would Zimbabwe's civil society trust the supposedly transparent reform efforts initiated by Mugabe and his party? Could a despotic Mugabe accept a constitution that had been rewritten "by the people?" And perhaps most critically, could a new constitution reverse the concentration of power in the presidency and permit presidential term limits?

In their confidential statement to the Corporation's board of trustees, program officers outlined what they saw as the greatest risks to the Commission's work:

"The fact that an increasingly unpopular president willingly appointed the commission opened the process to accusations of political rigging, which could reduce the credibility of the final product"; and the "compressed time frame," which allowed only six months for the entire process, from setting up the commission to writing the draft constitution.

Noting that other international funders had already decided the risks were worth taking, they wrote, "Ultimately, staff members believe that the strengths of this initiative—the high caliber and level of commitment of many of the commissioners, a number of whom are known to staff members, either personally or by reputation; the inclusive, transparent process; the albeit controversial indications that the president will honor the results—as well as the urgent need for constitutional reform, outweigh the considerable risks."

## Optimism Trumps Evidence

Persuaded by the actions of other trusted institutions and eager to see Zimbabwe, a country that had long been the focus of Corporation support, achieve governance based on the rule of law, the International Development Program staff came to believe the Constitutional Commission was capable of engendering sufficient grassroots support to overcome the president's machinations and succeed. In retrospect, it was an idealistic vision of the country as one wished to see it — democratic, inclusive and eager for reform, rather than as it was — corrupt, fractured and under the thumb of a tyrant intent on retaining power for life.

This confident point of view was influenced by the Corporation's longstanding focus on capacity building in African democracies; the proposed grant would be the last one made under the rubric of the developing countries program that predated Gregorian's presidency. Another key factor was program staff's familiarity with the Constitutional Commission's leadership, which included past grantee Walter Kamba in a key position as head of the coordinating committee, the chief administrative body responsible for producing the draft constitution. "Walter Kamba was an internationally recognized constitutional scholar and a very successful former vice-chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe," says Patricia Rosenfield, then International Development Program chair. "We had every reason to support him." McClure also wanted to back Kamba; "He was the university's first black vice chancellor," she noted, "and had helped Namibia with its constitution. He believed in the possibility of peaceful transition, and although they were often at odds, he had a long-term

working relationship with Mugabe. We thought it was worth a try.”

“Progressive organizations in civil society such as the Women’s Action Group, also a Corporation grantee, were invited to serve on the Commission to achieve some level of balance between government sympathizers and everyone else,” notes program officer Andrea Johnson. “Although it’s true that many of these groups declined because they did not believe the Commission as a whole would listen to them, we were encouraged by the effort to create an inclusive process,” she adds. At the same time, the Corporation’s president, Vartan Gregorian, while skeptical that any amount of money could oust a dictator of Mugabe’s stripe, felt strong pressure to stand beside other foundations in the spirit of partnership that was one of the Corporation’s highest values.<sup>1</sup> And so he deferred to the program staff’s recommendation and in October 1999 the grant was approved as a one-time special opportunity.

The sum of \$200,000 was provided to the Constitutional Commission of Zimbabwe for public education and outreach activities from October 1 to November 30, 1999. At the end of that time the draft constitution would be presented to President Mugabe, who would place it before a national referendum. According to the final grant report, approximately 25 percent of the funding was used for conferences and meetings while the rest went mainly toward an aggressive media campaign conducted in English, Shona, Ndebele and other Zimbabwean languages. “It was hoped the outcome would be a fair reflection of the values, interests and aspirations of the people of Zimbabwe,” Kamba wrote. But the stakes were too high for the Mugabe regime to let the true voice of the people be heard.

In the final analysis, the threats to this attempt at constitutional reform proved overwhelming. The 400 commissioners, all appointed by Mugabe, included every member of Parliament, a vast majority of whom were in the ruling party. This fact opened the process to accusations of collusion and cast doubts on the draft constitution in the eyes of the Zimbabwean people. Ultimately, even a leader of Walter Kamba’s stature could play only a minor part. Civic leaders on the Constitutional Commission were far outnumbered by Mugabe pawns, and were therefore powerless to carry out the people’s wishes. During the final drafting stages, 24 commissioners disassociated themselves from the process due to their belief that the

final document did not represent the majority view, particularly with regard to two issues: 1) the powers of the president and 2) land reform.

Opposition to the existing constitution, a document hastily negotiated in 1980 and amended through the years in the ruling party’s favor, was due largely to the focusing of power in the presidency and lack of presidential term limits. In fact, the widespread desire to correct these problems was the most important issue driving the entire movement for constitutional reform, as articulated by a vast majority of participants in the national outreach process. A new constitution that did not rein in the presidency was seen as useless. Land reform, meanwhile, had always been the most politically and emotionally charged problem in Zimbabwe and, given generalized suspicion of the government’s motives, it became an irreconcilable issue.

The unprecedented period of public debate, instead of building faith in the constitution, convinced a majority of voters that Mugabe contrived the entire process for his own benefit. In February 2000, when the day came for the referendum, the people of Zimbabwe voted “No!”

## Damage Assessment

All foundations are in the business of taking calculated risks. All grants, however promising and carefully researched, involve unknowns, and the decision to hand over funds requires a willingness to accept some degree of risk. Arguably, the Corporation’s belief in the potential of the Constitutional Commission of Zimbabwe was unfounded. Still, the desire to support democratic progress is laudable and projects aimed at making a difference may receive support despite serious doubts at the highest levels. In the case of Zimbabwe, while the grant produced the projected outputs—a public education and outreach campaign, the hoped-for outcome—a viable constitution acceptable to a majority of Zimbabwe’s citizens, was not achieved.

“If a project did not accomplish what a grant applicant declared it would, then there should be an in-depth discussion aimed at understanding the reasons why not,” Vartan Gregorian writes. “Failure in pursuit of discovery should never be rewarded with blame. Even a failed project can generate some knowledge. If we could view projects that don’t come to fruition in this way, it would be easier to extract those necessary lessons learned from them.”

The lesson learned from the ill-fated grant to Zimbabwe is an old one that must be re-learned time and again: that leadership and program staff must weigh their aspirations against a realistic assessment of the limits of what they can accomplish in order to keep both in balance. “One has to find a way to be daring while also being realistic—to figure out how not to over-promise,” Gregorian stresses. In addition, various safeguards have been put into place at the Corporation to bolster monitoring of grant-

<sup>1</sup> *The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa*, a joint effort of Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Ford, MacArthur, Rockefeller, William and Flora Hewlett and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundations supports efforts to build the capacity of universities and the field of higher education in Africa. Since 2000, more than \$150 million in support has gone to universities in six African countries. In September 2005, \$200 million more was pledged over the next five years.

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making, with payments contingent upon adequate progress toward goals, and placing of additional conditions on grants when there is cause for concern about structure or sustainability.

No new grants have been made to Zimbabwe by Carnegie Corporation since 1999. Looking back after seven years, constitutional reform was clearly a lost cause. "The very openness of the process, and the expectations it raised, was its downfall," wrote Sarah Rich Dorman, lecturer in African and International Politics at the University of Edinburgh.<sup>2</sup> The Mugabe regime's intention was undoubtedly to co-opt the process without ever acceding to any of the public's demands, and "the Constitutional Commission's hearings provided a forum in which ordinary Zimbabwean citizens were able to criticize explicitly the government's policies," Dorman noted. Inevitably this process led to rejection of the constitution and, by extension, Mugabe himself.

The ruling party's humiliating loss led to even more intolerant and authoritarian policies. Analysts point to the failed referendum as a tipping point in Mugabe's slide into full-scale tyranny. Conditions in Zimbabwe have gone from bad to disastrous. According to the United Nations Development Program, Zimbabwe's GDP has contracted over 40 percent since 2000, and the inflation rate had reached a high of 1,913 percent as of May 2006, while the exchange rate depreciated from ZW\$55/US\$1 to ZW\$109,000/US\$1. Chronic food shortages continue and HIV/AIDS, brain drain, and stark poverty make a dismal situation bleaker still.

As for the future, "we don't know that lessons from the experience of an open public outreach campaign *won't* be replicated when Zimbabwe undertakes its next attempt at constitution-making," Andrea Johnson contends. Meanwhile, there's Mugabe. At 82 years old, the oldest leader in Africa, "is the key obstacle to a more hopeful future," according to John Norris, Africa Program Executive of The International Crisis Group, an independent, nonprofit organization that works to prevent and resolve deadly conflict. Mugabe and his party win every rigged election and his retirement, scheduled for 2008, has been pushed back to 2010. Whether he must be eliminated by activists on the inside as Norris contends, or with the help of outsiders such as South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, isn't known. We do know even the highest motives may not defeat a regime inexorably bent on thwarting democracy. Sadly, all the grants in the world won't fix Zimbabwe while Robert Mugabe remains in power.

<sup>2</sup> "NGOs and the Constitutional Debate in Zimbabwe: from Inclusion to Exclusion." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Volume 29, Number 4, December 2003.

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