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# The Southern African ICT for Education Summit 2012

26-27 January, Victoria Falls

# Welcome

**Hon. David Coltart**  
Minister of Education, Sport, Arts & Culture,  
Zimbabwe



It is my distinct honour to welcome you all to the ICT for Education Conference today. I am delighted that you have all joined us in Victoria Falls.

The genesis of the Conference occurred in Morocco last year when I attended another conference organised by AfricanBrains which some of you attended. I invited John Glassey to consider holding a conference in Victoria Falls. John immediately took up the idea and I am grateful to him and his team for having confidence in my Ministry and Zimbabwe.

This is a very important conference for us in Zimbabwe. Aside from the educational benefit it has a broader national benefit. Zimbabwe has been through a turbulent period for almost a decade and a half, with political turmoil, hyperinflation and near collapse of the country. In 2008 the three parties who won seats in the March 2008 election agreed to a peaceful process of transition brokered by SADC.

Many, especially in the West, were deeply sceptical about this arrangement and have been reluctant to engage. My view has always been that as fragile and imperfect as this process is it remains the only non-violent method we have as a Nation of resolving our differences.

I am so grateful to AfricanBrains, all our fellow African Ministers and indeed the wide range of international companies who have come to Zimbabwe. Your presence is in fact support for this peaceful process.

The Zimbabwe Education sector itself was not left unscathed by this political turmoil and hyperinflation.

Zimbabwe has been recognised historically as having one of the best education systems in Africa. One of the outstanding post-independence accomplishments was the rapid expansion of Zimbabwe's education system so that all Zimbabwe's children enjoyed a good education. Successive colonial governments had imposed a series of bottlenecks to restrict the number of black Zimbabweans who could get a quality and complete education. Not just a quantitative leap, but a qualitative leap was achieved. By the early 1990s Zimbabwe was producing tens of thousands of high quality graduates who have since played a leading role in Zimbabwe and indeed South Africa, Botswana, the UK, Australia and many other countries.

However, our system all but collapsed in the last decade. When I took over in February 2009, 8000 schools were closed and 90,000 teachers were on strike. The pupil to textbook ratios were 15:1 at best, and 20,000 teachers had been lost from the profession in 2007-2008. Exam papers written the previous November had not even been marked. There was a collapse of infrastructure across the sector.

From an ICT perspective our EMIS system had collapsed. Our last reliable data was produced in 2006. When I arrived in my office it didn't even have a computer in it. Our headquarters had no functioning internet.

In the last three years we have focused on stabilising the education sector. Schools are now open. We have developed a good rapport with teachers. Whilst there is still a problem with salaries, which are woefully inadequate, our relations have improved. In September 2009 I launched the Education Transition Fund with UNICEF. Since then we have supplied some 13 million textbooks and pupil to textbook ratios are now 1:1.

A key element of the work has been to consult partners regarding the way forward. That culminated in an interim strategic plan which was passed by Cabinet in September 2010 for 2011 which has now been developed into a five year plan, which will soon be presented to Cabinet.

Key elements of this concern our plans for ICT in Education. The one benefit of the years of underfunding is that we now have an opportunity to leapfrog technology. There are four principal areas in which we plan to do this.

Firstly, we have agreed with UNICEF and UNESCO that a key aspect of the ETF Phase 2 will be the revamping of EMIS for all of our 8000 schools, 73 Administrative Districts and 10 Provinces. We need to develop an ICT system which can efficiently collect and disseminate data.

Secondly, we are planning an extensive programme of curriculum review and reform. The Zimbabwean curriculum was last comprehensively reviewed in 1986. We then had a state of the art Curriculum Development Unit in Mount Pleasant, Harare. Now, the CDU has all but collapsed. We need to renovate the CDU and supply it with hardware and software. We need to integrate ICT into the new curriculum and take advantage of podcast technology. We particularly need to invest in rural schools, which often have no electricity or internet connection, to ensure they can use a new ICT orientated curriculum.

Thirdly, most schools have no computers whatsoever and this is a massive need we must address. In this regard we have a particular need to equip advanced computer laboratories at the Academies we intend establishing for talented disadvantaged children.

Finally, we need professional development to enable teachers to use ICT technology themselves and to be properly trained to teach ICT.

So this Conference comes at an opportune moment for us. But I think that the regional nature of the Conference is also important. I increasingly think of Southern Africa as a unit, rather than just Zimbabwe in isolation. If we cooperate more and exploit the synergies which exist in the region we can improve the education sector across the entire region.

For example, yesterday I attended a school – Chinotinba Primary – where a minority of the students speak Tonga as their mother tongue. This is a minority language in Zimbabwe; however, just across the river there is a mirrored community in Zambia, where Tonga is widely spoken. Our vision is to ultimately make Tonga examinable to A Level, and I have no doubt that if we were to co-operate with our Zambian colleagues that would be easier to achieve. I also know that if we employ new Computer Technologies we can develop joint ICT based teaching materials cheaper and more easily. It is appropriate that the Honourable Minister Phiri, Minister of Education of Zambia is jointly opening this conference with me. I am hoping that this conference will explore these opportunities to co-operate throughout Southern Africa.

Finally, in thanking you for your attendance allow me to draw you back to Zimbabwe and to speak specifically to the companies present. For all the turmoil we have been through, Zimbabwe remains one of the most exciting investment opportunities in Africa. In the 1950s we had an economy bigger than that of Singapore. It used to be the second largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa. It is a country that still has enormous potential – we have a highly literate and hardworking population, massive natural resources, a wonderful climate, beautiful tourist resorts – and a fine educational structure. With political stability Zimbabwe is going to boom and I encourage you to join us as we turn Zimbabwe into the jewel of Africa.