

Development Planning, Political Cycles, and the Persistence of Poverty in Zambia: A Call for Process-Oriented Reform

Andisen Chance Zulu; Gregory Chikwanka; Christopher Kabwe Mukuka

Development, African Research University, Monze, Southern, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1990s, Zambia has produced a steady stream of technically sound development plans. Yet the translation of these plans into actual poverty reduction has been limited. The poverty headcount ratio fell slightly, from around 70 percent in 1991 to approximately 64 percent in 2022, while the absolute number of Zambians living in extreme poverty grew substantially. This paper asks: Why have successive, technically credible national development plans failed to reduce poverty significantly, and what process-oriented reforms could break this cycle? Drawing on a political-economy approach, the article argues that frequent revisions of plans tied to changes in government, and consultative processes that yield weak national ownership, undermine the continuity and long-term impact of development frameworks. A comparative institutional analysis of development planning and constitutional reform exercises in Zambia reveals that constitutional processes have historically mobilised deeper public participation and acquired stronger societal legitimacy. The paper distils lessons for redesigning the planning architecture: a deliberative, inclusive, nationally rooted consultation model, a semi-autonomous planning commission, a codified long-term vision, and robust public accountability mechanisms. These reforms aim to shield long-term strategies from political discontinuity and better link them with sustainable poverty reduction. The article contributes to the literature on policy durability, domestic ownership in aid-dependent states, and the political economy of development planning in sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: development planning, poverty reduction, national ownership, policy continuity, political economy, Zambia, participatory governance, constitutional reform

INTRODUCTION

Zambia is frequently described as a country of good plans but weak execution. Since the return to multiparty democracy in 1991, strategy papers, five-year national development plans, and long-term vision documents have been produced regularly and with technical competence. Yet three decades on, the proportion of the population living in poverty remains stubbornly high. The Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper estimated that around 70% of Zambians were poor, with 58% in extreme poverty, at the start of the 1990s (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2000, p. 5). By 2022, the World Bank reported that 64.3% of the population still lived below the international poverty line of US\$2.15 per day, translating to roughly 12.6 million people (World Bank, 2025). Although measurement differences make precise comparison difficult, the overall picture indicates that the policy effort has not been commensurate with the scale of livelihood transformation expected.

The academic literature provides several explanations: the limited poverty-reducing effect of copper-led growth in a resource-dependent economy (Auty, 1993; Cronjé et al., 2017), weak state capacity and administrative fragmentation (Chikulo, 2009), volatility induced by external shocks and commodity price fluctuations (IMF, 2022), and structural constraints linked to aid dependence (Saasa & Carlsson, 2002). This article points to a complementary factor: the process of formulating development plans and the limited domestic ownership it generates. It contends that plans closely identified with a particular administration are readily revised, repackaged, or discarded when political power shifts a pattern that erodes institutional memory, diminishes policy credibility, and undercuts the sustained commitment essential for structural transformation. By contrasting the dynamics of consultation in development planning with those of constitutional reform in Zambia, the paper highlights specific weaknesses in the planning process and proposes a practical reform agenda.

The central research question is: Through what process-oriented reforms can national development planning in Zambia acquire greater domestic ownership and political durability, and thereby contribute more effectively to poverty reduction? The analysis proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the methodology. Section 3 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on development planning, national ownership, and policy continuity. Section 4 presents the results and discussion, tracing poverty trends alongside plan instability, examining the political economy of planning, drawing institutional lessons from constitutional reform, and briefly situating Zambia in comparative African perspective. Section 5 proposes five concrete, process-oriented reforms, graded by feasibility. Section 6 concludes.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in an interpretative political-economy approach. It combines three interconnected components: a systematic documentary analysis of development planning instruments; a comparative institutional analysis of planning and constitutional reform processes; and a synthesis of secondary quantitative data on poverty trends.

Documentary Analysis

The primary data consist of official government documents: Zambia's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2000–2004), the Fifth National Development Plan (FNDP, 2006–2010), the Sixth National Development Plan (SNDP, 2011–2015) and its Revised version, the Seventh National Development Plan (7NDP, 2017–2021), the Eighth National Development Plan (8NDP, 2022–2026), and the Vision 2030 document. All documents were obtained from the Ministry of Finance and National Planning's public repository and relevant institutional libraries. Selection was purposive: we included all comprehensive, nationally endorsed medium-term plans and the single long-term vision document produced since 2000 to capture a complete cycle of post-PRSP planning.

Each document was analysed using a structured coding framework focusing on four themes:

- (a) stated objectives and sectoral priorities,
- (b) described consultation processes (participants, methods, duration),
- (c) degree of continuity or change in priorities relative to the preceding plan (operationalised by comparing stated strategic pillars, institutional arrangements, and flagship programmes),
- (d) monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms.

Two researchers independently coded the documents; discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The analysis also drew on secondary evaluations, such as the final evaluation of the FNDP (Ministry of Finance, 2014) and the mid-term review of the 7NDP, to triangulate claims about implementation gaps.

Comparative Institutional Analysis

The study uses the comparative institutional method to contrast development planning processes with constitutional reform exercises in Zambia. Constitutional review commissions (Mwanakatwe, 1993–1995; Mung'omba, 2003–2005) and subsequent technical committees consistently used more public participation mechanisms than planning exercises. We examined: (a) the institutional design of consultation mechanisms (composition, independence, timeline); (b) the scope and intensity of public participation (number of submissions, geographic reach, inclusion of civic education); (c) perceived legitimacy of outcomes as documented in parliamentary debates, civil society memoranda, and scholarly analyses (Phiri, 2008; Hinfelaar et al., 2021); and (d) the durability of constitutional provisions across political transitions compared with development plan provisions. Data were extracted from official commission reports, parliamentary records, civil society submissions, and secondary literature.

Quantitative Data (Secondary)

Poverty trends were analysed using secondary data from the World Bank's Poverty and Equity Briefs, the Living Conditions Monitoring Surveys (LCMS) of the Zambia Statistics Agency, and IMF Article IV Consultation reports. To improve comparability, we triangulated estimates across sources and explicitly note the discontinuities between the basic-needs approach of the early 1990s and later cost-of-basic-needs and international poverty lines. Population data from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs were combined with headcount ratios to estimate the absolute number of people living in poverty, illustrating the scale of the challenge.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework draws on three bodies of literature: the political economy of policy reform, emphasising how political incentives and institutional arrangements shape policy choices and their sustainability (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Whitfield, 2009); participatory governance, which theorises the link between citizen engagement and policy legitimacy (Heller, 2012; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012); and scholarship on national ownership in aid-dependent countries, which interrogates the conditions under which development strategies gain domestic political traction (Saasa & Carlsson, 2002; Booth, 2012).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Development Planning and Political Economy in Africa

National development planning in sub-Saharan Africa has undergone several paradigmatic shifts: from comprehensive state-led plans of the 1960s–1970s, through structural adjustment in the 1980s, to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) era and the recent “return” of medium-term plans and long-term visions (Mkandawire, 1999; Chimhowu et al., 2019). The PRSP process, introduced as a condition for debt relief, was officially grounded in broad participation and national ownership, but assessments of its effectiveness remain mixed (Booth, 2003; Dijkstra, 2005). Across the continent, a persistent “implementation gap” between the technical quality of plans and developmental outcomes is attributed to inadequate financing, weak M&E, limited state capacity, and external influence on domestic priorities (Kanyamuna et al., 2023).

National Ownership and the Paris Declaration

The 2005 Paris Declaration elevated national ownership to a key principle of aid effectiveness, asserting that developing countries should set their own strategies. Yet critical scholarship questions whether ownership has been operationalised, noting that many aid-dependent states continue to operate within policy parameters heavily shaped by donors (Whitfield, 2009; Sjöstedt, 2013). In Zambia, Saasa and Carlsson (2002) found that ownership was often shallow, with priorities reflecting donor preferences more than domestic political consensus. Even where civil society participation was comparatively high during PRSP formulation, implementation remained donor-driven (Eberlei, 2007).

Political Cycles, Policy Durability, and Institutional Credibility

Policy durability depends not only on technical design but on the political and institutional arrangements that embed reforms (Patashnik, 2008). In electoral democracies, policies lacking broad-based support coalitions are vulnerable to reversal when governments change. The political-business-cycle literature in Africa documents electorally timed interventions that often override long-term developmental concerns (Block, 2002). Institutional mechanisms such as independent fiscal councils, legally enshrined long-term frameworks, and multi-stakeholder consultation processes can counteract these tendencies by building cross-party consensus.

Participatory Governance and Democratic Legitimacy

Inclusive participatory processes can enhance policy legitimacy and sustainability. Heller (2012), drawing on Brazil, India, and South Africa, argues that meaningful participation embeds policies in societal expectations, making reversal politically costly. In constitution-making, inclusive processes are strongly linked to the

perceived legitimacy of outcomes (Abbate et al., 2019; Moehler, 2022). This theoretical foundation justifies the comparative institutional analysis with constitutional reform in Zambia, where deeper participation has produced more durable, politically salient documents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Poverty Trends and the Planning Record

Despite six comprehensive national development frameworks since 2000, the aggregate poverty headcount ratio has fallen only marginally, from roughly 70% in 1991 to 64.3% in 2022 (World Bank, 2025). The absolute number of extremely poor Zambians has grown substantially, from about 4.5 million in the early 1990s to over 12.6 million, driven by population growth outpacing incremental improvements. Rural poverty has remained above 75%, and urban poverty rose by 8.5 percentage points between 2015 and 2022 (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2023). Chronic poverty—persisting across multiple survey periods—is concentrated in rain-fed agricultural areas and peri-urban settlements (Shepherd et al., 2022).

The planning documents themselves are technically competent. The 7NDP, for instance, built around five strategic pillars (economic diversification, poverty reduction, reducing inequality, human development, and governance), was praised for its diagnostic rigour (UNDP, 2020). Yet implementation has consistently fallen short. The final evaluation of the FNDP noted major gaps in sectoral targets due to poor resource mobilisation, weak M&E, and misalignment between planning and budgeting (Ministry of Finance, 2014). Kanyamuna et al. (2023) observe that Zambia’s planning systems are formally coherent but undermined by institutional instability as planning mandates shift across ministries, eroding technical memory.

Political Cycles and Plan Instability

A key structural constraint is the cycle of revision, rebranding, and replacement that accompanies changes of government. Table 1 summarises the sequence of plans, administrations, and observed discontinuities.

Table 1: Zambia’s National Development Plans, Administrations, and Continuity

Plan (Period)	Administration (President/Party)	Key Political Transition	Notable Changes / Discontinuities
PRSP (2000–2004)	MMD (Chiluba, Mwanawasa)	–	Introduced under HIPC; strong donor alignment.
FNDP (2006–2010)	MMD (Mwanawasa, Banda)	Continuation of MMD	Broad-based growth strategy; new institutional structures.
SNDP (2011–2015)	PF (Sata)	MMD→PF, 2011 election	Shift in sectoral priorities, institutional reconfiguration; mid-cycle revision.
Revised SNDP (2013–2015)	PF (Sata, Lungu)	–	Adjustments after leadership change.

7NDP (2017–2021)	PF (Lungu)	Consolidation of PF	Five-pillar framework; alignment with SDGs and Vision 2030.
8NDP (2022–2026)	UPND (Hichilema)	PF→UPND, 2021 election	Presented as a break; new thematic emphasis, altered institutional responsibilities.

Sources: Ministry of Finance and National Planning (various years); authors’ analysis.

The pattern is clear: each change of ruling party has been accompanied not only by renumbering but by significant alterations in priorities, institutional structures, and monitoring frameworks. Even within the same party, presidential succession led to a revised SNDP. The Ministry responsible for national planning has been created, abolished, and merged multiple times since 1991. This instability generates several negative consequences:

- It undermines the long-term investment horizons required for infrastructure, human capital, and institutional reform.
- It raises perceived policy risk for domestic and foreign investors, discouraging the patient capital needed for structural transformation.
- It erodes institutional memory in the public service, as frameworks, indicators, and evaluation methodologies are repeatedly discarded.
- It fosters public cynicism, as citizens and partners perceive plans as administration-specific rather than national commitments.

The root cause, we argue, is the perception that development plans are the property of a particular administration. This perception arises from consultation processes that are extractive and technocratic, rather than deliberative and broad-based. The preparation of the 8NDP, for example, involved provincial stakeholder workshops and technical consultations with ministries and development partners over several months (Ministry of Finance, 2022). While useful, these exercises were largely confined to organised stakeholders; local government authorities, traditional leaders, community-based organisations, and ordinary citizens had limited meaningful influence. The resulting document, though technically sound, did not acquire the societal embeddedness needed to withstand political transition.

This finding aligns with Heller’s (2012) argument that participation must be consequential—allowing citizens real influence—to build legitimacy. In Zambia, a substantial gap exists between the rhetoric of participation and the practice of consultation, a pattern observed elsewhere in Africa (Booth, 2012).

The international dimension reinforces this ownership deficit. External actors have historically shaped Zambia’s development agenda (Saasa & Carlsson, 2002), and the requirement to align planning documents with donor priorities and global frameworks (SDGs, Agenda 2063) can create the impression that plans are as much for external audiences as for domestic constituencies.

Lessons from Constitutional Reform Processes

A useful comparison is provided by Zambia’s constitutional review exercises. While their recommendations have often been selectively adopted, they have consistently mobilised deeper public participation than development planning. The Mwanakatwe Commission (1993–1995) received submissions from all provinces, held public hearings broadcast on radio, and engaged citizens through civic education campaigns far beyond urban centres (Phiri, 2008). The Mung’omba Commission (2003–2005) further expanded participatory mechanisms by recommending a constituent assembly and a national referendum, anchoring legitimacy in popular sovereignty (Hinfelaar et al., 2021).

This deeper participation has had tangible effects on the perceived legitimacy and political longevity of constitutional outcomes. Even when governments rejected significant portions of commission recommendations—the MMD government dismissed around 70% of the Mwanakatwe Commission’s proposals—the reports themselves remained politically salient reference points for civil society and opposition demands. In contrast, development plans are usually shelved with little political contestation when a new administration assumes office.

The comparison is instructive because both constitutional reform and development planning occur within the same political system, facing similar capacity and resource constraints. Therefore, differences in participatory depth and outcome durability point to institutional design choices, not merely structural determinants. Three specific lessons emerge:

- i. Independent, representative commissions: Constitutional review bodies have been broadly representative and independent of the executive, enhancing perceived impartiality. Planning exercises, led by the Ministry of Finance/National Planning, lack this insulation.
- ii. Generous timelines and resources for consultation: Constitutional commissions typically operate for two to three years, holding hearings nationwide and receiving thousands of submissions. Development plans are compressed into 12–18 months, with consultation concentrated in short workshop series.
- iii. Sustained civic education: Constitutional processes are accompanied by civil society-led awareness campaigns, using community radio and local meetings to engage citizens beyond the elite. Development planning exercises are far less publicised; most Zambians remain unaware of plan contents or formulation processes.

A summary of these contrasts is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Participation in Constitutional Reform vs. Development Planning in Zambia

Dimension	Constitutional Reform Commissions	Development Planning Exercises
Institutional leadership	Independent commission with diverse membership	Led by a ministry; limited external oversight
Consultation timeline	2–3 years	12–18 months (medium-term plans)
Geographic reach	Nationwide hearings, all provinces	Selected provincial workshops
Civic education	Extensive, civil society-led	Minimal, government-led
Public submissions	Thousands of written and oral submissions	Limited, mostly organised stakeholders
Outcome durability	Reports remain politically salient even if recommendations rejected	Plans quickly superseded after a change of government

Source: Authors’ compilation from commission reports and plan formulation documents.

While the analogy must not be overstretched constitutional processes deal with foundational rules and command unique public attention the contrast nonetheless demonstrates that institutional design can yield markedly higher public engagement and document legitimacy within the same polity.

Comparative Perspectives: Botswana and Mauritius

Briefly placing Zambia in comparative context reinforces the argument. Botswana's national development planning, anchored by a professionalised public service and deeply embedded consultative traditions (the kgotla system), has maintained striking continuity across administrations. The country's Vision 2016 and subsequent Vision 2036 provided stable strategic direction through multiple electoral cycles under different ruling parties (Hope, 2002). Mauritius, too, has sustained planning continuity through a broad elite consensus on economic policy fundamentals, insulating core strategies from political turnover (Meisenhelder, 1997). In both cases, broad-based legitimacy—built through inclusive, institutionally embedded processes—has been key to policy durability. Zambia's Vision 2030, launched in 2006 with similar long-term aspirations, lacked such participatory foundations and institutional anchoring, and consequently failed to guide successive governments effectively. This illustration, though brief, is analytically useful not as a claim of direct causation but as a demonstration that the mechanisms of legitimacy and continuity are neither impossible in the African context nor a product of unique cultural factors alone.

The Present Imperative

Zambia's constrained development finance—following the 2020 sovereign default and protracted debt restructuring—and intensifying global demand for its critical minerals, agricultural land, and renewable energy potential create both urgency and opportunity. Without a stable, nationally owned development compass, short-term commercial deals and fragmented external priorities risk deepening the resource curse (Auty, 1993). A legitimate long-term vision can provide the framework to align external engagements with domestic goals such as job creation, agricultural transformation, and value addition, and to sustain investments in human capital whose returns span decades.

An Agenda for Process-Oriented Reform

Building on the analysis, we propose five interrelated reforms. To increase practical utility, we differentiate those achievable through executive/administrative action (short-term) from those requiring legislative or constitutional change (medium- to long-term).

From Extractive to Deliberative Consultation

Feasibility: Immediate (executive action, resource reallocation)

The shift from one-off, workshop-based consultation to iterative, decentralised deliberation is the foundational reform. A deliberative model involves citizens and civil society organisations not merely commenting on draft plans but participating in setting priorities and making trade-offs. This requires:

1. Allocating at least two years for formulating a national vision and 12–18 months for a medium-term plan.
2. Facilitation by neutral bodies (universities, faith-based organisations, professional associations) rather than only government officials.
3. Using community radio, local assemblies, and traditional leadership structures to reach rural populations, supplemented by digital platforms where connectivity allows.
4. Concrete feedback loops demonstrating how citizen input influenced the final plan.
These design principles, drawn from the participatory governance literature (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012), are administratively feasible without constitutional amendment, though they demand political will and budget reallocation.

Institutionalising a Long-Term Development Vision

Feasibility: Legislative process (special parliamentary majority)

Zambia should adopt a 20–30-year national vision through a constitutional-style process. A broadly representative independent commission would draft the vision, conduct nationwide consultations, and present the document for public debate and parliamentary ratification by a two-thirds majority. This would prevent unilateral revision after a change of government. The vision would serve as the binding overarching framework for all subsequent medium-term plans and budgets. Periodic reviews (every five years, linked to census and major survey cycles) would permit adaptation without wholesale replacement. Such a legislative anchor, modelled partly on Botswana’s Vision apparatus, requires parliamentary action but not a constitutional referendum.

A Semi-Autonomous National Planning Commission

Feasibility: Statutory creation (Act of Parliament)

A National Planning Commission, established by statute and insulated from direct political control, would be tasked with: (a) ensuring technical coherence across successive medium-term plans; (b) independently monitoring and publicly reporting on implementation of the long-term vision; (c) conducting rigorous evaluations; and (d) preserving institutional memory when ministries are reorganised. Commissioners would be appointed through a transparent, parliamentary-vetted process for fixed, overlapping terms that span electoral cycles. Adequate, predictable funding could be secured through a multi-year budget appropriation insulated from annual discretion. The South African National Planning Commission and Ghana’s National Development Planning Commission offer instructive, if imperfect, precedents. This reform requires an Act of Parliament.

Embedding Plans in National Comparative Advantage

Feasibility: Immediate (administrative and communication strategy)

To deepen public ownership, development strategies must speak directly to livelihood concerns. Plans should clearly articulate how sectoral strategies translate into jobs, better services, and income opportunities in specific districts. Sectors grounded in Zambia’s comparative advantages agro-processing, mining-linked manufacturing, tourism, and renewable energy should be positioned as flagships, with community-level progress reports that give concrete form to abstract planning goals. This is largely a matter of communication design and administrative prioritisation, achievable within the current institutional framework, though it requires a deliberate shift in planning culture.

Transparency, Public Accountability, and Plan–Budget Integration

Feasibility: Immediate (executive and administrative action)

Transparency must be central to the planning cycle. Key mechanisms include:

Annual “state of the plan” reports tabled in Parliament and disseminated through community radio, social media, and local noticeboards in major languages.

Publicly accessible open-data platforms showing plan indicators, budget allocations, and implementation progress, with mobile-friendly interfaces.

Legal and resource support for civil society organisations and community-based monitors to produce independent shadow reports.

Full costing of plans and explicit alignment of the medium-term expenditure framework with plan priorities, requiring the Minister of Finance to report annually to Parliament on alignment.

Donor alignment behind domestically defined plan goals, rather than parallel processes.

These accountability measures can largely be implemented through executive order and administrative regulation, though legislative codification would strengthen their durability.

CONCLUSION

Zambia's persistent poverty amidst a stream of technically sound development plans is not a failure of policy ideas but of the political and institutional processes that fail to embed those ideas in broad-based national ownership. This article has argued that shallow, executive-led consultation produces plans seen as administration-specific rather than national assets, making them easy to revise or discard with each political transition. The comparative evidence is clear: planning processes that mirror Zambia's constitutional reforms with independent commissions, nationwide deliberation, and sustained civic education achieve legitimacy and durability. Botswana and Mauritius reinforce the point that institutional design, not unique structural fortune, anchors development strategies across electoral cycles.

The pragmatic and phased reform agenda includes deliberative citizen engagement, a legally entrenched long-term vision, a semi-autonomous planning commission, anchoring plans in tangible comparative advantage investments, and robust transparency and budget alignment. Some steps require only administrative resolve; others demand legislation. None are utopian. Zambia's constrained fiscal circumstances and the surge in global interest in its resources make this agenda urgent: without a nationally owned compass, short-term external deals risk deepening the resource curse; with one, the country can direct external engagement towards lasting job creation, agricultural transformation, and poverty reduction. Future comparative research should test further the causal links between participatory planning design and implementation outcomes, providing an evidence base to re-engineer planning architectures across the developing world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and institutional comparisons presented in this article, the following recommendations are made to policy-makers, development partners, and civil society actors interested in strengthening the ownership, continuity, and poverty-reducing impact of national development planning in Zambia. Each recommendation is accompanied by an indication of its primary mode of implementation—immediate administrative action, legislative enactment, or a combination—so that reformers can sequence efforts realistically.

1. Re-engineer Consultation as Deliberative, Citizen-Centred Engagement

The existing pattern of extractive, workshop-based consultation—in which stakeholders are invited to short, government-led events to react to pre-formulated draft plans—should be replaced by an iterative, decentralised, and genuinely deliberative model of public engagement. This reform is achievable immediately through executive action and reallocation of existing resources. A deliberative process requires that citizens and civil society organisations are not merely commentators on drafts but active participants in defining priorities, evaluating trade-offs, and shaping the content of the plan from an early stage. To be credible, the process must be given adequate time: at least two years for a long-term national vision and twelve to eighteen months for a medium-term plan, so that engagement can extend to district and community levels. Facilitation should be led, or at least co-led, by neutral and trusted intermediaries—such as public universities, faith-based organisations, professional associations, and local civic networks—to insulate deliberation from perceptions of executive manipulation. Given the persistent urban-rural connectivity gap, digital platforms can supplement but cannot replace face-to-face methods; community radio, local assemblies, and traditional leadership structures remain indispensable channels for reaching rural populations. Most importantly, the process must be consequential: clear feedback loops must be established to show, in accessible formats, how citizen input has influenced the final plan. Designing participation along these lines, as the comparative experience of constitutional review commissions in Zambia demonstrates, can markedly increase the societal legitimacy and political durability of planning documents without requiring constitutional change.

2. Codify a Long-Term National Vision Through a Parliamentary Special Majority

Zambia needs to adopt a 20–30-year national development vision whose legal standing protects it from unilateral revision, rebranding, or abandonment by a new administration. This reform requires legislation, specifically passage by a special parliamentary majority (such as two-thirds of members), to signal a cross-party societal compact that transcends electoral cycles. The vision should be developed through a constitutional-style process: a broadly representative independent commission, with members drawn from political parties, civil society, traditional authorities, the private sector, and academia, would draft the document after extensive nationwide deliberation. The draft would then be debated in Parliament and in public fora before being ratified through the special majority procedure. Once adopted, the vision would become the binding overarching framework for all subsequent medium-term plans, annual budgets, and sector strategies. To remain relevant, it should include a mandatory, independent review every five years—timed with the national census or major survey releases—that allows for technical adjustment without permitting wholesale ideological repurposing. Botswana’s experience with Vision 2016 and Vision 2036 illustrates that a legally anchored, broadly legitimate long-term vision can provide a stable developmental compass even through changes of government. The legislative route is demanding but essential: without statutory entrenchment, even the most participatory vision remains an executive policy statement vulnerable to the very instability this article documents.

3. Establish a Semi-Autonomous National Planning Commission by Statute

A third, and complementary, institutional reform is the creation of a semi-autonomous National Planning Commission through an Act of Parliament. The Commission would be shielded from direct political control by a governance structure that ensures independence: commissioners would be appointed through a transparent, parliamentary-vetted procedure for fixed, overlapping terms that extend beyond a single electoral cycle. Its core statutory functions would be to (a) safeguard technical coherence across successive medium-term plans by maintaining continuity of methodology, indicators, and evaluation frameworks; (b) independently monitor implementation of the long-term national vision and publish an annual public report; (c) conduct rigorous, independent evaluations of plan performance that are tabled before Parliament and disseminated publicly; and (d) serve as the institutional memory of the planning system, preserving documentation, analytical capacity, and technical lessons when ministries are restructured. Adequate, predictable funding—perhaps through a multi-year budget line protected from annual discretionary cuts—would be essential to its credibility. South Africa’s National Planning Commission, which has maintained long-term analysis despite political shifts, and Ghana’s National Development Planning Commission, embedded in the 1992 Constitution, offer instructive precedents, though their effectiveness has varied with executive compliance. Zambia can learn from both their strengths and their limitations by ensuring robust appointment processes, independent public reporting mandates, and a clear relationship with, but not subordination to, the ministry responsible for planning.

4. Anchor Plans in Visible Investments Linked to National Comparative Advantage

To transform development plans from abstract government documents into national instruments that ordinary citizens recognise, support, and hold leaders accountable for, planning must be visibly anchored in tangible investments that leverage Zambia’s comparative endowments. This is primarily a matter of administrative practice and communication strategy, and can be initiated without new legislation. Sectoral strategies in agro-processing, mining-linked manufacturing, tourism, and renewable energy—the areas where Zambia possesses natural, geographic, and skill-based advantages—should be elevated as flagship programmes within each plan. Critically, the plans must spell out, in plain language and with geographically specific detail, how these flagships will translate into jobs, improved services, and higher incomes in particular districts and for particular groups. For example, an agricultural transformation strategy should show how it will affect smallholder maize and legume farmers in Eastern Province; a tourism plan should specify expected employment gains for youth in Livingstone. Progress reports on these flagships should be produced at the community level, using local languages and formats accessible to non-specialist audiences. This pragmatic, livelihood-centred approach makes the plan “legible” to

citizens in their daily economic lives, generating the kind of grounded public engagement that technocratic planning has failed to produce and that, the evidence shows, is necessary for political durability.

5. Institutionalise Transparency and Citizen Accountability, and Integrate Planning with the Budget

Transparency and accountability must be embedded as core, ongoing features of the planning cycle, not treated as afterthoughts or one-off consultation events. This cluster of reforms can be implemented largely through executive and administrative action, though legislative codification would strengthen its longevity. At the centre is the production of an annual, independent “State of the Plan” report, tabled before Parliament and aggressively disseminated through community radio, social media, public notice boards, and civil society networks in major local languages. Alongside this, an open-data platform should make plan indicators, budget allocations, and implementation progress publicly accessible in formats that are usable by community-based monitors, journalists, and ordinary citizens—ideally including mobile-friendly dashboards. Civil society organisations and local monitoring committees should be given legal access to information and modest resources to produce independent “shadow” implementation reports, creating an accountability loop that sustains pressure beyond the initial formulation phase. Equally important, the integration of planning and budgeting—a weakness persistently identified in evaluations—must be made mandatory and transparent. The medium-term expenditure framework must be demonstrably derived from the national development plan, and the Minister of Finance should be required to present an annual alignment statement to Parliament, showing how budget allocations match plan priorities and explaining any deviations. Finally, development partners should be encouraged, and where possible bound by agreement, to align their project and programme financing with domestically defined plan goals, reversing the long-standing fragmentation documented by Saasa and Carlsson (2002).

6. Align Donor Programmes with Domestically Defined Plan Priorities

Aid dependence has historically weakened national ownership of Zambia’s development agenda, as donor preferences have often driven priority-setting and parallel implementation structures. This recommendation, while demanding sustained political negotiation, is indispensable. The starting point—which requires no new agreement—is for the government to consistently and publicly use the nationally owned plan as the authoritative framework for all discussions with development partners, rather than producing separate strategy documents tailored to different donor requirements. Building on the transparency mechanisms proposed above, a single, publicly available “development cooperation dashboard” should map all external financing flows onto the plan’s priorities, exposing misalignments and gaps. In formal dialogue forums, such as the Joint Assistance Strategy review, government should insist on the principle of alignment codified in the Paris Declaration and subsequent Accra and Busan commitments. Over time, and as planning processes acquire greater domestic legitimacy through the deliberative reforms outlined above, government will be in a stronger position to reject projects that do not fit its strategic framework and to demand that donor funds are channelled through national systems. This shift in the power dynamic of aid relationships is difficult and gradual, but it is precisely the strengthening of domestic planning credibility that can make it possible.

7. Rebuild Professional Planning Capacity Within the Civil Service

Process-oriented reforms will have limited impact unless Zambia reinvests in a professional, technically competent, and politically insulated planning cadre within the civil service. This is a long-term institutional investment that must be led by government, though it can be usefully supported by development partners provided such support is channelled through government structures rather than parallel project units. Key measures include: establishing a dedicated, merit-based recruitment track for planning professionals with clear career progression and competitive remuneration to attract and retain talent; providing sustained, university-accredited training programmes in development planning, monitoring and evaluation, and public financial management, linked to institutions such as the University of Zambia and the National Institute of Public Administration; protecting technical planning staff from

politically motivated transfers or dismissals through human resource regulations that tie tenure to professional certification rather than political affiliation; and ensuring that the proposed National Planning Commission, once established, has a statutory role in setting professional standards and certifying the technical competence of planners across ministries. Rebuilding this institutional memory and analytical depth is a generational undertaking, but it is the foundation on which all other planning reforms must stand. Without it, even the best-designed participatory processes and legislative frameworks will be undermined by an inability to translate societal aspirations into operationally sound, costed, and implementable programmes.

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