Migration and Social Protection:
The Experiences of Undocumented Zimbabwean Nationals Based in the United Kingdom

Introduction
The paper focuses on the theme of migrant access to social protection, with particular reference to undocumented Zimbabwean migrants based in the United Kingdom. It draws on the results of a study conducted in the UK by the present author during the period 2005-2006 which sought to document the life and times of Zimbabwean nationals who fled to the UK post year 2000. Zimbabwe experienced a severe economic and political meltdown, which resulted in an estimated 3.4 million nationals fleeing their homeland (Zimbabwe Independent, 2004; Donnelly, 2004). By some accounts, an estimated 1.1 million of them settled in the UK (Donnelly, 2004, Mupedziswa, 2009).

Issues in access to social protection
The UK has in place a well-developed social protection regime, but undocumented migrants cannot access most of the services. An overarching concern of the undocumented migrants therefore was how to cope with life in a country (UK) where societal attitudes and government policy precluded them from accessing various forms of social protection.

In terms of shelter, undocumented migrants said they could not access public housing schemes for reasons of affordability and/or fear of being arrested by the police. Concern was expressed over a new bill which would oblige landlords to check the immigration status of their tenants. However, for some, the legislation would not deter their plans as they could still secure accommodation through colleagues who sub-let their properties. To many, the real concern therefore revolved around the burden of raising money for rent. Some got around this problem by staying with relatives/friends.

In the UK, entities caught employing undocumented migrants risked the wrath of the law. Many undocumented migrants were therefore obliged to seek jobs via the back door. Informal/illegal employment had however, proved risky for the migrants, given that some had ended up serving jail terms for flouting the country’s labour laws. Legislation, however, had not completely deterred these migrants’ prospects for employment. Apparently some employers were keen to hire undocumented migrants because they paid them low wages, with no fringe benefits.

Out of desperation, many undocumented migrants sought work in informal settings as escorts, carers etc. It is...
Unemployed regular residents in the UK are eligible to claim a weekly job-seeker’s allowance, but the facility is of course not open to undocumented migrants, not least because they do not pay towards the National Insurance Contributions (NIC). The lack of access to the allowance compounded their woes.

The National Health Service (NHS) provides access to healthcare to every documented resident in the UK. Some respondents indicated they never utilised the NHS because they did not possess a registration number, while others said it was because of fear of exposing themselves to the authorities. Respondents expressed concern over a new bill which, if passed into law, would oblige medical doctors to check the immigration status of their patients. Health services such as eye test, dental care and certain prescriptions, required payment upfront, and most respondents said they could not afford to pay for them.

Legal services tend to be extremely expensive in the UK, and hence the migrants said they usually depended on ‘charitable sources’. Thirteen of the respondents had engaged lawyers to fight deportation, while a few were trying to regularize their status. A couple of them had at some point tasted life in a detention centre for failed asylum seekers. Apparently, inmates reportedly received less than £1/day for their basic daily needs. One young female indicated that conditions in detention centres for failed asylum seekers like Yarl’s Wood, were appalling.

Coping strategies

Largely due to limited access to social protection, many migrants resorted to a variety of coping strategies, including joining associations and development oriented groups of different types, participating in community support groups and church congregations. Even so, some still employed desperate measures in an effort to cope. For example, some had resorted to inflicting self-injury when faced with deportation. A respondent told of colleagues who had resorted to hunger strike, or even to cutting their, in an effort to avoid deportation.

Conclusion/Way forward

Clearly, the undocumented Zimbabwe migrants in the UK grappled with numerous challenges, which are compounded by limited access to social protection. Their insecure legal status meant that they survived outside formal society resulting in them having to regularly play cat-and-mouse ‘games’ with the law enforcement agents. The British government has been keen to deport failed asylum seekers, but many undocumented migrants were adamant they would, for various reasons, not voluntarily return to Zimbabwe.

In terms of the way forward, it would appear the promotion of good governance and a clear development path on the part of the Zimbabwean government (the sending country), would go some way in reducing out-migration. For as long as political and socioeconomic conditions in the country remained unconducive, many citizens would continue to seek to leave the country in search of greener pastures. Receiving countries such as the UK should, however, endeavour to treat undocumented migrants in a humane and civilised manner. Human rights organisations too should do their best to monitor rights abuses in destination countries.

References