I cross the border for a living: Informal cross-border couriers (bomalaisha) plying the SA-Zim corridor

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Welcome
Presentation overview

• Zimbabwean socio-economic context
• History of migration to South Africa
• Who are bomalaisha?
• How do they work?
• Advantages and regulatory challenges
• Way forward
Zimbabwean context

- Independence attained in 1980
- Government policies: economic growth, job creation and welfare
- 1980 – 1990: highly regulated economy with huge social spending
- 1991-1997: Structural Adjustment Programmes
- 1997-2008: Crisis in Zimbabwe
- 2009-2013: Government of National Unity
- 2013: ZANU (PF) is back!
- Bottomline: economy, jobs, political upheaval
The main man
Evolution of migration

- Historical ties with the Ndebele in Zimbabwe and Zulu in South Africa
- Historical labour migration even before diamonds discovered
- 1970s: exile during liberation struggle
- 1980s: fleeing from political violence
- Mid-1990s: disgruntled public servants
- Late-1990s to 2000s: a flood of migrants to South Africa, Botswana, Namibia etc
- Migration to escape poverty, violence, find jobs, provide for families
Migration to neighbouring countries

From a trickle...  ... to a flood
Bomalaisha

• *Ukulaisha*: “to transport” (Ndebele/Zulu)
• Early labour migration: Informal arrangements between migrants and informal passenger carriers, Ndebele-speaking (mainly Joburg- Southern Zimbabwe)
• Presently: Owner-drivers, renter-drivers and touts, Shona- and Ndebele-speaking (other SA and Zim provinces)
• Interviewees: predominantly male drivers, 25- 35 years, average 6 years in the trade
• Most were previously engaged in transport sector or formal employment
Services rendered

- People: documented and undocumented, well and unwell, alive and deceased
- Money: cash remittances to Zimbabwe
- Goods (remittances): food, clothes, household goods, agricultural inputs, building materials
- Goods (commercial): inputs and stock for formal and informal businesses in Zimbabwe
How do they work?

- Most vehicles registered in SA and owner has cross-border transport permit
- Renter-driver pays owner R 4000 per trip and pockets the rest
- Service advertised through personal networks and recommendations from prior customers
- Based on trust, usually no contracts signed
- Ranking system: Joburg, Bulawayo, Harare
- Cash upfront or ‘pay forward’
- Money: 10 to 20 per cent fee
- Goods: fee based on size, weight, value, time of year
- Door-to-door transport/delivery
Advantages of *bomalayisha*

- From the clients’ perspective:
- Limited formal channels to send money home
- Some migrants are undocumented (Western Union)
- Need to travel and send money and goods to remote locations
- Commercial deliveries: flexible, quick turnaround time
- Facilitate undocumented migration
- Repatriation of sick migrants
- Repatriation of human remains
Regulatory challenges

- Client complaints: mix-ups in deliveries
- Damage/loss/pilfering of goods and money: who bears risk?
- Generally pay relevant fees including for repatriation of remains, tolls etc. ‘
- But for customs duty payable on goods: under-declaration of goods and value and bribery
- State agents involved in extortion, corruption and facilitating unlawful conduct
- Authorized routes versus flexible door-to-door service
- More road blocks, more bribes, higher costs
- Undocumented migration may be linked to human trafficking
Bomalaisha say

“Isilayisha used to take care of our families. Now, it’s like gambling. Sometimes you are lucky, but most days you go home with nothing. You have an agreement to take the client’s goods to her mother ...in the rural areas. You can’t risk having them confiscated because you must honour the agreement and deliver the goods. If you don’t, the clients will never call or recommend you. So all the time you are paying bribe after bribe on the Zim-side. Sometimes we borrow money from our passengers to pay the bribes. The worst part is when you get home to your wife and you have no money for her and the children.”
Focus on formal remittance channels?
A case to promote and support bomalaisha

• Provide important services to migrants, travelers and businesses
• Promote welfare of migrant families
• Promotes availability of goods and food security in times of scarcity
• Contribute to the fiscus through goods and services purchased, tariffs, VAT paid
• But leakage of customs duty
• Important to minimize risk and costs to clients
Formalising the informal

• Government recognition and engagement
• Establish association to act as a platform for dialogue
• Concessions on fees and taxes
• Incentives: tie permit system to compliance
• Insurance of money and goods sent
• Promote transparency and sanction corruption
Help wanted!

• Informal cross-border couriers in your countries?
• How do they operate?
• How are they regulated?
• References to any literature on informal cross-border couriers/transporters?
Thank you! Ndatenda