Migration and the Challenge of Accessing Social Protection: Experiences of Undocumented Zimbabwean Nationals Based in the UK

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Introduction

- At the turn of century Zimbabwe experienced a severe economic and political meltdown, resulting in thousands fleeing their homeland.

- By 2000/3 approx 3,4 million fled to South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. (Zimbabwe Independent, 2004; Donnelly, 2004).

- By some accounts 1,2 million of these settled in South Africa, 300 000 in Botswana, 200 000 in Mozambique, and the remainder in other parts of the world. (Donnelly, 2004).
Demographics

- Official British records indicated that only 28 000 Zimbabwe nationals had settled in there.

- However, independent estimates suggest about 1 million Zimbabweans fled to the UK. (Donnelly, 2004).

- Upon arrival in the UK, some of the migrants regularised their stay while others did not.
Methodological Issues

- The paper is based on a study conducted in UK by the present author during the period 2005 - 2006. (South –North Migration).

- Through availability/snowball sampling, the study used a detailed questionnaire to document life and times of 250 Zimbabwe nationals across the United Kingdom.

- Of these, forty-nine (49) respondents did not possess valid immigration papers and these are the focus of the paper.

- The paper considers the challenges faced by these undocumented Zimbabwean nationals in regard to accessing social protection in the UK.
Waves of migration to UK

- By some accounts, Zimbabwean migrants in the UK arrived in three main ‘waves’.

  1\textsuperscript{st} group - Pioneers who arrived in UK in late 1990s-early 2000s, on short term visitors’ visas to make a ‘quick buck’ (economic) and return home.

  2\textsuperscript{nd} group - Politically victimized individuals who were genuinely fleeing harassment by state operatives from around 2000. Sought asylum. (In UK, they participate in political rallies and vigils).

  3\textsuperscript{rd} group –”Fake” asylum seekers who didn’t claim asylum upon arrival, did not meddle in politics. Most of their claims, launched later, were premised on deception and fraud (Mhlanga, 2006).
The Study: Age and marital status

- Of the 49 undocumented respondents:
  
  - 26 were male while 23 were female, and their ages ranged from 20 to 77 years.

  - The bulk of the respondents were aged 39 and below, meaning they were economically active.

  - About 29% were single, 22% married and living with spouses, 27% married but temporarily living apart from their spouses. The remainder were divorced/separated.
Education and skills

- 55% had secondary education, while 41% held a degree or higher (i.e. post graduate) qualification. Only 4% had primary education, and no further qualification.

- Respondents skill areas included health, business, education and engineering, among others.

- 76% had had been working in Zimbabwe in their professions before they migrated to the UK.
Reasons for leaving Zimbabwe

These included the following:

- **Political** atmosphere (violence, etc).
- **Economic** related factors (i.e. employment),
- **Education** (seek further education).
- **Social factors** (including marriage).
- **Travel** (i.e. just to see the world).
Categories of respondents

- The study found that the **undocumented Zimbabwe migrants** in UK fell into the following main categories:

  - **Failed asylum seekers**; (Some in hiding for fear of deportation because, their papers were no longer valid, etc.

  - **Over-stayers** who arrived legally but were now on expired visitor’s visas. They were **not trafficked** or **smuggled** into UK.

  - Some had arrived on **fake passports** e.g. South African or Malawian passports fraudulently obtained.
Access to shelter

- Many reported they stayed alone or with relatives/friends; often drifting from one relative/friend to another.

- They could not access the public housing schemes partly because they had no papers but also due to erratic sources of income.

- They were aware of a bill being processed which would oblige landlords to check immigration status of their tenants.

- The respondents however, indicated this would not deter them as they would simply access shelter through colleagues who sub-let. A major worry for many was lack of income to pay rent.
Access to employment

- They noted that asylum seekers were not allowed to work in the UK. It was even worse for undocumented migrants.

- Many reported to be working in informal settings where they were exploited. Carers, escorts, etc). Got low wages which were paid in cash.

- 71.4% of the undocumented migrants were not making use of their professional qualifications, risking the danger of deskilling.

- Seven respondents confessed to having bought (fake) registration cards for 150 Pounds each in a pub to facilitate formal employment.

- A couple of males had borrowed or hired national insurance numbers, and when they got exposed by police, they served jail terms.
Access to unemployment benefits

- They indicated that while unemployed regular residents were eligible to claim a weekly job seeker’s allowance, but undocumented migrants could not.

- This was largely because they did not pay National Insurance Contributions (NIC), and hence they could not claim.
Access to health care

- They said NHS provides healthcare to every legal resident in UK, including legal migrants. An NHS registration number was needed but of course they did not have access to such.

- They explained that health services such as eye test, dental care, prescriptions, needed payment upfront, even for some who could access NHS. The undocumented could not afford.

- Some indicated they never utilised NHS as they were scared of using the service for fear of exposing themselves.

- Most indicated that they were aware of a new bill being mooted which, if passed into law, would oblige medical doctors to check the immigration status of their patients.
Access to legal services

- Few were fighting the authorities to have their status regularised.

- Several (13) reported they had no option other than to engage lawyers although they found it extremely expensive to do this.

- A young woman with a baby who was being cared for by its British father, was fighting deportation; she had been detained.

- She said, conditions in detention centres for failed asylum seekers like Yarl’s Wood were appalling. Inmates received less than £1/day.

- Several of the respondents were anxiously awaiting the outcome of a test case in the courts, to determine whether they would be sent back home to Zimbabwe. They were doing everything to resist deportation.
Survival strategies

- **Informal/illega employment**, although this was risky as some had served jail terms for flouting work laws.

- **Rent a bank account** or keep all earnings on self. (One respondent confessed he had 3000 Pounds on his person).

- **Making themselves ‘invisible’, so that the British government cannot reach them with their tough laws.**
Resistance strategies

- If they get caught by the long arm of the law, the undocumented migrants reportedly faced much abuse.

- One respondent quoted a sympathetic UK official as having remarked, “This should not be happening in a country which claims to be civilised, human beings cannot be treated in this manner”.

- Resistance strategies included inflicting self-injury. One young lady said she had cut her wrists with a blade which she had found in a detention cell, to avoid deportation. Another had gone on hunger strike.
Coping mechanisms

- All the respondents faced overwhelming challenges. To cope with the situation, the undocumented migrants reported that they had:
  - Joined Associations of different types.
  - Formed Community support groups.
  - Joined Church congregations.
  - Started development-oriented groups.
Conclusion

- Clearly the undocumented Zimbabwe migrants in the UK who participated in the study lived difficult lives.
- They reported that they often ‘played’ cat-and-mouse with the law enforcement agents.
- Because of insecure legal status, they survived outside formal society.
- Consequently, they struggled to meet basic needs since social protection is inaccessible to this group.
Way forward?

- Good governance and a clear development path on the part of sending countries will help reduce numbers of citizens unceremoniously leaving the country.

- Receiving countries such as the UK should endeavour to treat undocumented migrants humanly.

- Human rights organisation should do their best to monitor rights abuses in destination countries.