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No. 29: Zimbabwe's Return Migrants – Before & After Challenges

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**ZIMBABWE'S RETURN MIGRANTS – BEFORE & AFTER
CHALLENGES**

SAMP POLICY BRIEF NO. 29

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Various countries in the developing world have implemented policies and incentives to encourage the participation of their respective diasporas in development. The ‘best case’ countries include the Philippines, India, Mexico, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Morocco, Kenya and Ghana, and there seems to be a positive correlation between reforms meant to facilitate diaspora participation and the level of actual participation. The reforms and policies not only contribute to the diaspora maintaining social and psychological links with their home countries but also serve as vehicles for promoting remittances and investments. However, diaspora participation in the (re)development of the country of origin can never be taken for granted.²

1.2 A key question is whether diasporas created by crisis-driven migration are as liable or willing to engage in this way. Much has been written about crisis migration from developing countries hit by political and economic instability. In most cases, outmigration has led to a severe brain drain as the skilled are often the first to leave. This has certainly been the case in Zimbabwe, which experienced a protracted period of economic and political crisis after 2000. Zimbabweans who left the country are now dispersed all over the globe. Migration has often been seen as a one-way process with migrants moving to destination countries, sending for their families as soon as possible and settling permanently.³ If migrants talked of return, it was assumed that they were simply dreaming (i.e. ‘the myth of return’).

1.3 The theoretical and empirical literature on migration demonstrates that under certain circumstances migrants do return after spending a number of years abroad.⁴ The decision to return is not only an important issue in its own right but has crucial implications for migrant behaviour. Literature on return migration emphasizes individual cost-benefit models that focus on success and failure in the destination country, job markets and life-cycle plans.⁵ Even though current evidence suggests that the least successful migrants are the most likely to return, success is subjective and depends on expectations prior to migration, perceptions about quality of life upon return and the fact that positive change in the country of origin might influence the desire to return.

1.4 Since 2000, Zimbabwe has been through a period of sustained economic and political crisis. The crisis has been well documented and has affected all spheres of life for most Zimbabweans.⁶ Amongst the repercussions was a crippling flight of professionals and other skilled people. Most crisis migrants arriving in industrialized countries are not particularly

welcome; with less than half settling permanently.⁷ In addition, many skilled migrants are underemployed in menial and low-skilled jobs in countries of destination. Crisis-driven migration from a country such as Zimbabwe therefore has the potential to generate a counter-flow of migrants once the crisis conditions are resolved.⁸

1.5 In 2008, a power-sharing agreement among the rival political leaders – Robert Mugabe, Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara – was brokered by former South African President Thabo Mbeki. The Global Political Agreement (GPA) and its attendant, but somewhat shaky, Government of National Unity (GNU) provided a semblance of normality. Morgan Tsvangirai admitted there were ‘shortfalls’ in implementing all the provisions of the agreement but was optimistic that these would be attended to at the earliest convenience.⁹ The International Crisis Group analyzed the implementation of the GPA after the first year and observed that the unity government was clearly making discernible, albeit sometimes painfully slow, progress in a number of areas. It noted that schools and hospitals had reopened; civil servants were being paid (even though the salaries were still low); goods had returned to supermarket shelves; and the cholera epidemic had been controlled. Human rights activists reported a significant drop in abuses.¹⁰ The ravaged economy had generally improved, with Zimbabwe recording 4.7 per cent GDP growth in 2009 – the first positive total in a decade. Since the Zimbabwe dollar was suspended and the US dollar and South African rand were adopted as legal tender, inflation had also fallen dramatically.¹¹ In the July 2013 general elections, the MDC lost dismally to the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front ZANU (PF). Zimbabwe’s 2013 elections were characterized by confusion and uncertainty.¹² The tentative recovery nurtured since 2009 could be wiped out quickly if a new government does not move fast to assure investors, donors and others.

1.6 This paper provides a critical analysis of the GNU by addressing two key migration-related questions: first, how has the Zimbabwean government responded to the brain drain and the prospect of return migration? Second, what challenges and obstacles face skilled migrants who returned after 2008? Answers to these questions should assist policy-makers and other stakeholders to formulate appropriate policies to attract and retain Zimbabwean professionals.

2.0 Changing Attitudes Towards the Diaspora

2.1 President Mugabe and his government have a love–hate attitude towards the diaspora. One of the key reasons for their love is the money sent by people in the diaspora. Remittances from the diaspora have played a major role in keeping the country afloat even in the midst of the economic crisis and international isolation.¹³ However, political utterances by the leadership have more often expressed disdain for the diaspora. They have been variously typecast as ‘Blair’s spies’ (in the case of those going to live and work in the UK between 1997 and 2007), sell-outs, anti-nationalists, traitors and members of the opposition and thus ‘agents of regime change’.

2.2 With leadership changes in the UK and the US, the signing of the GPA and the attendant power-sharing arrangement in Zimbabwe, a more tolerant and accepting attitude emerged towards the diaspora. In a speech in November 2012, for example, President Mugabe noted: “*Kunyika kwavakatizira ikoko kunana Britain havasisina basa navo. Vangangopihwawo twu welfare pano nepapo asi mabasa anowanikwa ndiwo ekukwenya tumisana twechembere. Zvino ungayambuka makungwa nemakungwa kunokwenya itwo twumisana itwotwo? Ko vanambuya vedu kuno kumusha vanokwenywa nani?*”¹⁴ (You run off to Britain, you get there and you get welfare benefits and jobs cleaning old white folks’ behinds.¹⁵ Do you really have to go for such long distances to do this? Who will clean your own grandparents if you desert them?). He then added: “*Aiwa ngavadzoke zvavo, ngavadzoke kumusha. Hapana anemhosva ikoko*” (Well, you can come back home, you have nothing to fear).

2.3 Launching the Brightness Journey Camp in November 2010 (a free cataract eye operation programme by Chinese doctors at Chitungwiza Central Hospital), Mugabe said that despite the fact that Zimbabwean doctors had disparaged him and the government in order to gain entry to the UK, they remained Zimbabweans. In similar vein, ZANU-PF has attempted to tap into the diaspora. At its December 2011 Congress, ZANU-PF reported that it was establishing administrative structures in the UK and South Africa, bolstered by what it saw as ‘greater interest’ being shown in its programmes by Zimbabwean exiles. The thawing of relations has also revealed itself through the writings of Nathaniel Manheru.¹⁶ Echoing the voice of the President, Manheru observed that “these [diasporans] are Zimbabweans...who one day will bring back vital skills that will transform this country...They can’t stay there forever.”¹⁷ Manheru also noted that Mugabe himself was once a member of the diaspora and is apparently

easily upset by reports of well-qualified Zimbabweans doing menial jobs or being abused as though they were stateless.

2.4 The various parties to the GPA anticipated that the agreement would also mean the return of skilled migrants who could contribute to re-building the country by providing much-needed expertise and services. Without significant return migration there is little hope of sustained economic recovery in Zimbabwe.¹⁸ Article VII of the GPA makes a commitment to the formulation of policies and the institution of measures to attract the return and (voluntary) repatriation of Zimbabweans in the diaspora, in particular that of skilled personnel. The Short-Term Emergency Recovery Programme (STERP), a corollary to the GPA, also acknowledged the role that the Zimbabwean diaspora could play in the reconstruction of the country. The GPA was intended to ‘create a genuine, viable, permanent, sustainable and nationally acceptable solution to the Zimbabwe situation’.

2.5 To demonstrate its commitment to attracting professionals to return, the Government of National Unity (GNU) put in a place a taskforce on human skills identification, deployment, and retention (THSIDR) with the aim of addressing the loss of human skills from the country due to emigration. The taskforce’s website recognizes that Zimbabwe’s economic crisis precipitated an exodus of professionals in search of better economic opportunities.¹⁹ Sectors most affected include medicine, engineering, surveying, architecture, audiology, veterinary medicine and forensic science.

2.5 Researchers and policy makers often lament the lack of consistent and comparable migration data. In the case of Zimbabwe, there is no agreement on the exact number of Zimbabweans in the diaspora. The Zimbabwean government has certainly not kept any reliable statistics of departures.²⁰ Current estimates range from 500,000 to four million.²¹ The same lacuna applies to figures concerning those who return. In 2011, the IOM Deputy Chief of Mission to Zimbabwe, Katie Kerr, told journalists that “we are trying to establish the exact number of emigrants who have returned since the formation of the inclusive government and it’s unfortunate that at the moment we do not have the figures. But we have witnessed qualified professional nationals choosing to return.”²²

3.0 Contextualizing Return

3.1 The IOM Framework for Return Migration (2008) notes that a number of international instruments refer to the rights of migrants on return. The most vital reference is contained in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 13(2), which states that: ‘everyone has the right to leave any country, including his (sic) own, and to return to his country’.²³ However, the right to leave is ‘an incomplete right’, in that there is no corresponding right to enter a state other than one’s own. More importantly, the IOM Framework acknowledges that while there is an individual right under international law to return to one’s country, and a corresponding international duty to re-admit citizens making voluntary use of that right, the right to return cannot be invoked by states who want to initiate the return of individuals.

3.2 One recent study has proposed the following typology of forms of return migration:²⁴

- Seasonal returns – dictated by the nature of the work (for example, construction or hotel work);
- Temporary returns – when the migrant returns, but intends to re-emigrate abroad;
- Permanent returns –when the migrant resettles in the home country for good;
- Return of retirement – at the end of migrants’ working lives;
- Return of failure – when migrants fail to adapt to the host society and return quickly to their homeland. Return migration is a manifestation of a failed migration experience, meaning that expected higher earnings have failed to materialize;²⁵
- Return of conservatism – when migrants always intended to return, then return is the logical outcome of a calculated strategy, defined at the level of the migrant’s household and resulting from the successful achievement of goals or targets;
- Return of innovation – when migrants remain in the destination country beyond the target return and largely adopt the host country’s cultural values, but later realize that their acculturation can never be complete and so return, bringing with them new ideas, values and ambitions.

3.3 The literature suggests that the distinction between migrants who choose to return and those who are forced to do so constitutes a key variable in explaining the reintegration of returnees in the home society and labour market.²⁶ The majority of returnees, although relatively well educated, have worked in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs abroad. In this sense, working experience abroad tends to have a de-skilling effect in terms of educational

/professional qualifications.²⁷ The decision to return also involves a combination of two sets of factors: the personal and domestic circumstances of the individuals and their families and perceived conditions in the country of origin (such as ‘comfort level’, socio-economic environment, cost of living, crime levels, opportunities for investment, political stability and attitudes towards returning migrants).²⁸

3.4 Return often also means departure from what has become familiar and an encounter with a society that has changed since they left: “usually [return] migrants have to leave the roots created in the host society, as well as friends and places of reference (home, school, leisure spaces). They may have to face new standards of living and lifestyles; to start new routines, to deal with new patterns of reference and behaviour codes; to re-establish old friendships and/or renew their social ties, that is, to adjust themselves to a new living context. Returning home can also be a challenge to migrants due to the country’s and local people’s transformation as well as to the migrants’ identity reconfiguration during their stay abroad.”²⁹ Return migrants can also be “ill-prepared for their return, owing to the fact that it is difficult for them to gather the information needed to secure their return and to gain better awareness of the social, economic and political changes that have, in the meantime, occurred in their origin countries.”³⁰

4.0 Migrants and the GPA

4.1 The inception of the GNU helped stall the extreme political violence in Zimbabwe and partially stabilize the economy. However, the structural causes of Zimbabwe’s internecine political conflict and the concomitant problems remained. Thus, there was a decided unwillingness by some sections of the GNU to implement all of the provisions to the letter and spirit of the GPA, exposing the half-hearted attempts to solve the crisis. A large section of the international community was sitting on the fence about fully co-operating with the GNU as they felt strongly that the authoritarian pillars of the regime were still intact. This watered down the zest and excitement within the diaspora for a return to normality.

4.2 Various studies have examined the post-2008 return potential of Zimbabwean migrants. A 2012 study of Zimbabweans in South Africa showed that migrants who left for purely economic reasons (47 per cent) or political reasons (34 per cent) were more likely to return than those who left for other reasons or for a combination of political and economic reasons.³¹ Migrants who left Zimbabwe from 2000 onwards, when the country was plunged into an

economic and political crisis, were also more likely to return than those who left before 2000.³² Studies among Zimbabweans in the diaspora elsewhere have shown that 67 per cent of those based in the United Kingdom and 65 per cent of those in South Africa were likely to return at some time in the future.³³ In Canada, 52 per cent of Zimbabweans surveyed said they have given some thought to return while 45 per cent had given no or hardly any thought to the possibility.³⁴ Only 8 per cent indicated that it was likely or very likely that they would return to Zimbabwe within two years. The likelihood of return rose to 20 per cent within five years and to 49 per cent at some point in the future. This study was undertaken during the tenure of the GNU but many were worried about the current state of Zimbabwe's economy and political environment. Positive change in Zimbabwe would influence the desire to return but most had adopted a 'wait-and-see' attitude.³⁵

4.3 Research for this paper found that those who returned after 2008 had to adapt to several dimensions of life in transitional Zimbabwe. Several respondents indicated that they experienced feelings of insecurity in their private and public spaces. One cited the high crime rate and the political violence that sometimes took place in the presence of members of the police force and the army. In the years since the inclusive government was formed, political unease and sporadic violence has persisted. The intimidation and violence that characterized the constitutional outreach process, for example, was followed by heightened political tension. Violence, threats and coercion against the rural electorate increased, accompanied by the message that anything but a ZANU-PF win would result in death for opposition supporters. The Zimbabwe Inclusive Government Watch tracked numerous breaches of the GPA in the form of violence, intimidation, hate speech, threats, abductions and brutality, and legal harassment of opposition politicians and supporters in 2011. Zanu-PF was least compliant with the terms of the GPA.³⁶ Other returnees intimated that having become used to complete freedom of speech abroad, they felt restrained by the polarized political environment in Zimbabwe.

4.4 For others who were contemplating returning, the biggest worries were Zimbabwe's work ethic and the comparatively poor salary levels of the highly skilled. One respondent exclaimed, "*kupona negwaku mukwaku kunonetsa!*" (living on morsels is challenging). For many civil servants, monthly salaries were at one point barely sufficient to cover a week's expenses. The 'jacket administration' that emerged during the economic crisis (when civil servants went to work, hung their jackets in a conspicuous place in order to give the

impression that they were in the office, and then left for another job in order to take home a second salary) was equally off-putting. For many people returning with a professional work mentality, adjusting to this kind of environment represented a huge potential challenge. “Life in Zim is too fast for my liking!” was how one man summarized his fears about returning to Zimbabwe. He explained that people in Zimbabwe were still in the inflationary mode adopted during the economic crisis.

4.5 Personal insights from returnees illustrate some of the other challenges that they confront. One female returnee, a geologist, had gone back to Zimbabwe to join a foreign-owned mining company. Its existence was threatened by the indigenization drive, which aims to achieve a fifty-one per cent indigenous ownership of all businesses in Zimbabwe. She said that investors in the company were taking this threat seriously and many were withdrawing their funds. She was already contemplating relocating to an investor-friendly country. Another respondent had left one of Zimbabwe’s institutions of higher learning to take up a staff development fellowship abroad. On completion of his studies, he returned home to resume his previous position. However, the situation on the ground (especially the work environment) drove him away again. During his absence, the facilities at the institution had deteriorated to a critical state of disrepair. With no running water, the toilets had to be used with buckets. He had left his family overseas and his decision to go back and re-join them was quickly made.

4.7 The HIV and AIDS epidemic and overburdened health system also pose a major threat to efforts to lure people from the diaspora back to Zimbabwe. The system will become even more stressed if donors withdraw their support for antiretroviral treatment for HIV and AIDS patients.³⁷ Zimbabwe’s medical system does not compare at all favourably with those in many of the countries in which Zimbabweans now live. Health professionals who wish to return face their own difficulties. At a 2010 Gaborone meeting of Zimbabwe’s university lecturers and health professionals, the medical professionals present complained to Professor Midion Chidzonga, Dean of the College of Health Sciences at the University of Zimbabwe, and an official from the Health Professions Authority about the hostile and expensive re-registration process for those whose membership had lapsed while they were out of the country. In terms of the Health Professions Act (Chapter 27:19), part XV provides for the various types of registers and registration certificates, with Section 90 stipulating the requirements for such registration, conditions of erasure from such registers and prescribing the fees to be paid.³⁸ At the same time that the Zimbabwean authorities are trying to woo back their ‘lost’ medical

professionals, the Health Professions Authority continues to demand that *all* members must be up to date with their payments/subscriptions. Most returnees and potential returnees have found this requirement absurd, not to mention expensive. Fees per annum ranged from amounts of US\$10 for trainees to US\$200 for some specialist medical practitioners. Considering the low levels of remuneration of health workers, the fees were high and resulted in some not re-registering. Staffing in hospitals has also been affected by cumbersome and expensive re-registration procedures for health professionals who might be willing to return home.

4.8 Some returnees feel that colleagues who remained in Zimbabwe have been able to amass many assets. For example, through the land redistribution programme, some professionals managed to secure large farms and other properties. The productive use of these farms has meant that they subsequently increased their income streams. Others commented negatively on their experiences with Zimbabwean officialdom and how they were exposed to the whims and corruption of officious bureaucrats. One returnee recounted how their goods were impounded by the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority and later sold to the local officers at prices well below market rates – an action embodied by the popular phrase ‘*mbudzi inodya payakasungirwa*’ (a goat will feed from where it is tethered).³⁹

4.9 Some returnees commented on the negative reception from those in their profession who had remained and felt that those who migrated ‘deserted’ the country in its lengthy ‘hour of need’, returning only to take advantage of the improved conditions. In a number of cases, returning migrants have improved their qualifications and international exposure which, far from being seen as a plus for Zimbabwe, is viewed as a threat by those who remained. In such circumstances, the returnees were subjected to harassment. The IOM has even warned that return programmes should avoid actions that could be perceived by local communities as discriminatory or as unfairly privileging returning migrants, especially in sensitive situations following conflicts or crises.⁴⁰

5.0 Conclusion

The GPA ushered in a period of cautious hope for most people who had left Zimbabwe due to the dire political and economic situation of the previous decade. Many acted on that hope and returned, only to confront the difficulties and challenges discussed above. The results of the Zimbabwean general elections in 2013 sounded the death knell for the GPA and GNU. The

renewed political uncertainty delivered by these elections means that, once again, the immediate future is in the balance. Most returnees had come back on the spur of the moment; many others were contemplating return but had adopted a ‘wait-and-see’ attitude during the tenure of the GNU.⁴¹ This holding pattern is likely to be reinforced by the election results.

ENDNOTES

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⁶ J. Crush and D. Tevera, *Zimbabwe’s Exodus: Crisis, Migration, Survival* (Cape Town: SAMP and Ottawa: IDRC, 2010).

⁷ P. Martin and G. Zürcher, “Managing Migration: The Global Challenge” *Population Bulletin* 63(1) (2008): 1-20.

⁸ Crush et al., *Heading North*.

⁹ The Zimbabwe Inclusive Government Watch tracks media articles and reports that provide examples of violations of the agreement between ZANU-PF and the two Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formations (see www.sonakele.com).

¹⁰ The International Crisis Group is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to preventing and resolving deadly conflict.

¹¹ “Crisis Group Work on Zimbabwe – The Current Situation” *CrisisWatch* 2009 at www.crisisgroup.org/en/key-issues/a-way-forward-for-zimbabwe.aspx?gclid=CMq3_ruj_aYCFQsTfAodr1i3aA

¹² I. Scoones, “Zimbabwe’s elections 2013: more confusion, more uncertainty”, *African Arguments* 5 August 2013 at

<http://africanarguments.org/2013/08/05/zimbabwe%E2%80%99s-elections-2013-more-confusion-more-uncertainty-%E2%80%93-by-ian-scoones/>”

¹³ In the 2014 Monetary statement, the acting Governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, Charity Dhliwayo, indicated that “in order to tap into the Diaspora resources, the Reserve Bank is guided by the 2014 National Budget in recognizing the vital role played by Zimbabweans all over the world. Toward this end, work is currently underway to come up with appropriate facilities to effectively harness Diaspora savings for the development of the domestic economy”; see http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/news/zimsit_rbz-2014-monetary-policy-statement-full-document/

¹⁴ “Come back home, President tells exiled doctors” *The Herald* 25 November 2010 at <http://www.herald.co.zw/come-back-home-president-tells-exiled-doctors/>

¹⁵ Zimbabweans working in care facilities in the UK are dubbed the ‘British Bottom Cleaners’ (a play on the acronym BBC) in Zimbabwe; see J. McGregor, “Joining the BBC (British Bottom Cleaners): Zimbabwean Migrants and the UK Care Industry” *Journal of Ethnic Migration Studies* 33(5)(2007): 801-24.

¹⁶ ‘Nathaniel Manheru’ is a pseudonym for someone close to the Mugabe circle who makes catchy revelations about the president’s feelings and thoughts. Most people suspect it is either George Charamba or Jonathan Moyo.

¹⁷ N. Manheru, “Diasporans: The Fraction We Can’t Name” *The Herald* 14 November 2010.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See www.zimbabwehumancapital.org.

²⁰ Crush and Tevera, *Zimbabwe’s Exodus*.

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³⁰ J. Cassarino, "Theorising Return Migration: The Conceptual Approach to Return Migrants Revisited" *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 6(2)(2004): 253-79.

³¹ D. Makina, "Migration and Development: Issues and Some Lessons from Zimbabwe" In E. Masunungure and J. Shumba, eds., *Zimbabwe Mired in Transition* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2012).

³² Ibid.

³³ Crush et al, *Heading North*.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Crush et al, *Heading North*.

³⁶ <http://www.sokwanele.com/zigwatch>

³⁷ P. Mbanje, "HIV patients at risk as donors pull-out" at <http://www.newzimbabwe.com>
<http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-8048-HIV+patients+at+risk+as+donors+pull-out/news.aspx>

³⁸ Government of Zimbabwe, *Health Professions Act (Paper 27:19)* (Harare: Government Printers, 2002).

³⁹ "ZIMRA, Police, Harass Returning Migrants" *The Zimbabwean* 11 May 2011.

⁴⁰ IOM, *Return Migration*.

⁴¹ Crush et al, *Heading North*.