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AFTER THE EXODUS: THE CHALLENGES OF RETURN MIGRATION IN ZIMBABWE

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SUMMARY

- Since the early 1990s, political and economic unrest in Zimbabwe have caused large numbers of Zimbabweans to emigrate in search of foreign employment.
- Zimbabweans living abroad remain reliable remitters of both money and goods during their home nation's economic decline over the previous two decades.
- While the Zimbabwean government is attempting to encourage return migration, it has yet to introduce substantial policies or programs to address the challenges migrants and their families may face in resettlement.

BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe is a country with a long history of migration, serving as both a sending and receiving country within the Southern African region for over a century (Maphosa, 2005). Heightened political and economic instability in Zimbabwe since the early 1990s, however, have significantly altered existing regional patterns. These conditions have resulted in what many refer to as the “Zimbabwean exodus” (Crush and Tevera, 2010).

The effect of this substantial movement of individuals and their potential return has considerable relevance to social and economic development policy. The exodus has transformed traditional family structures and previous perceptions about who fulfills income-earning roles within households. The departure of thousands of Zimbabweans from all age groups and skill levels has also had a debilitating effect on the country's economy, particularly in the private and public skilled sectors (Crush and Tevera, 2010).

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At the same time, however, the remittance of money and goods sent by these emigrants has become essential, not only to the budgets of many households, but also to the national economy (Bracking & Sachikonye, 2006). As conditions begin to stabilize in Zimbabwe, many migrants are contemplating, or have already returned home. This backgrounder explores the challenges presented by potential return migration to Zimbabwe for both the individual/household and on a more general societal level. It outlines factors that fuelled the original out-migration, the government's attempts to harness in-migration and new challenges posed by that process.

ZIMBABWE'S EXODUS

It is difficult to estimate the exact number of Zimbabweans who have left the country in the past two decades, due in part to the high number of undocumented departures. The government of Zimbabwe has not kept accurate departure records and neighbouring countries such as Botswana and South Africa only record legal entry into the country, and do not keep track of corresponding departures (Crush and Tevera, 2010). The nature of migration has also changed in significant ways. For example, there has been a sharp increase in the number of 'day-trippers' to neighbouring countries since 2005. These are individuals who cross the border to shop and return with goods on the same day. Between 2005 and 2007, for instance, over 100,000 day-trippers crossed the border into Botswana (IOM, 2010). In addition, increasing numbers of women are joining the migration stream to provide supplemental income for their households.

The traditional push and pull factors leading to emigration from Zimbabwe are complex and involve historical, social, economic, political and cultural factors. Yet, the declining economic and social conditions in Zimbabwe led to the increasing use of migration as a livelihood strategy for many families (Crush and Tevera, 2010). According to research undertaken by the Southern Africa Migration Project (SAMP), Zimbabwean households receive an annual median amount of \$109.30 (all figures USD) in cash remittances and \$54.90 of goods remitted (IOM, 2009). Research by Alice Bloch (2010) with Zimbabwean diaspora in the UK indicates that migrants retain strong social ties with family and friends in Zimbabwe with over 80 percent of participants remitting money. As a result of these enduring

ties, there is a strong desire among Zimbabwean migrants to return home (Bloch, 2010).

POLICY RESPONSE

The alleged link between migrant remittances and poverty alleviation has received considerable critical attention from scholars and researchers. Despite this criticism, international bodies such as the United Nations (UN), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and World Bank have adopted remittances as a policy priority with great enthusiasm. In line with the strategies of such international institutions, the Government of Zimbabwe has developed both policies and investment programs aimed at harnessing the development potential of migrant remittances. The most notable of these is the 'Homelink Scheme,' established in 2004. This program was developed to increase formal remittances through the provision of money transfer services that could provide for the investment needs of Zimbabwean emigrants (IOM, 2009). The diaspora responded positively to this development and formal remittance transfers increased to \$61 million after the introduction of the program in 2004. This also provided the government with the benefit of increased foreign currency as a result of fees and taxes charged on these transfers (IOM, 2009).

The governmental benefits from remittances also increased in 2007 and 2008 when comparable exchange rates were introduced, which provided payment of remittances in foreign currency, including the US dollar and South African Rand (IOM, 2009). Again, the Government of Zimbabwe benefited through taxes levied on increased remittance transfers through formal channels. While the government has been active in promoting remittances through formal channels, they have been relatively less successful in encouraging the return of skilled migrants (Chikanda, 2010).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RETURN MIGRANTS

There are a multitude of factors that lead migrants to consider returning to Zimbabwe. Beyond aspirations for reuniting with family members, political, economic and social factors also play a significant role (IOM, 2010). Improving conditions in Zimbabwe and the increasingly restrictive policies of destination countries both provide impetus to consider return.

Return migration is an important aspect of the migration-development nexus (Bloch, 2010; IOM, 2010). In particular, the return of skilled workers is often portrayed as a gain for financial, human and social capital from a development perspective. The positive effects of skill return, however, can only be achieved in an enabling and receptive environment (IOM, 2010). Without such an environment, migrants are less likely to contribute to socio-economic development upon return.

Despite the importance placed upon return, in Zimbabwe very little research or preparation has been undertaken for the reality of such return (IOM, 2010). In particular, the importance placed upon migrant remittances as a survival strategy for households does not correspond with policies promoting return. The loss of remittance income often creates challenges for households that depended on payments from abroad for basic necessities such as food and shelter. According to research conducted by SAMP, the proportion of remittances spent on food in Zimbabwe are some of the highest in the world (Crush and Tevera, 2010). The loss of remittances can clearly have a disastrous impact on households that have depended upon them for survival.

The prospect of return can be challenging for the development of the individual migrant as well. Many emigrants abandoned academic or professional careers in Zimbabwe, moving abroad to undertake employment that provided little opportunity to obtain new skills or training (McGregor, 2010). In addition, traditional roles within Zimbabwean households have undoubtedly changed as a result of high levels of migration. The increasingly feminized nature of Zimbabwean migration presents particular challenges for both individual migrants and households.

Contradictory to migration patterns in other Southern African countries, Zimbabwean women have migrated in almost equal numbers to their male counterparts (Crush and Tevera, 2010; Dodson et al., 2008). This has, for many households, re-defined traditional gender roles, including definitions of family breadwinners. The new income earning power of migrants may contradict both state and societal values and norms, however very little research has been undertaken to understand the implications of return within the Zimbabwean context. The IOM has identified successful strategies for engaging and encouraging return of diaspora, including use of official

websites offering employment information and incentives including travel cost recovery schemes, integration assistance and medical insurance.

In the coming months and years, it will be increasingly important for Zimbabwe to look towards the experiences of other migrant source countries to understand and plan for the return and reintegration of migrants (IOM, 2009). Initiatives such as the Migration Dialogue for Southern Africa will be key players in such development, and further participation from the non-governmental sector in Zimbabwe will also be central to successful return and integration strategies.

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