

Why are Zimbabwean migrants ambivalent about return?

Insights from the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration'

Crisis in Zimbabwe has led to a mass exodus. In the United Kingdom alone, there are now more than 200,000 Zimbabweans. Hopes for the future increased when Zimbabwe's ruling party and opposition formed a joint Government of National Unity in 2009. While this has not led to radical political change, the economy has been stabilized and violence has subsided. As a result, Zimbabwean migrants in the UK have begun to look to Zimbabwe for new opportunities. When asked about returning to Zimbabwe, however, they give contradictory and ambivalent answers. This policy brief explains why.

Brief Points

- The question of return to Zimbabwe from the United Kingdom is fraught with uncertainty and is approached cautiously by migrants.
- Migrants' legal status affects how they relate to the possibility of return.
- Return is not a simple personal choice; Zimbabwean migrants are influenced by ideas in the Zimbabwean community about how one 'should' consider return.
- Zimbabwean migrants often believe that they should return wealthy, but are generally poorer now than when they left Zimbabwe.
- Ideas about home, belonging and identity are central to return considerations. Emigration changes these ideas – in ways that can be quite painful.

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The Zimbabwean diaspora

The colonial bond between the two countries has allowed Zimbabweans to migrate to the UK over a period of decades. Larger flows of emigration have generally followed significant events in Zimbabwe, such as the war for independence and the country's recent crisis. The latter has led to emigration on a larger scale than ever before.

Many Zimbabweans have recently immigrated to the UK by applying for asylum either upon entry or following the expiry of a visa (see Figure 1). However, although conflict is generating emigration from Zimbabwe, most migrants are not asylum-seekers. Zimbabweans with British ancestry are eligible for British citizenship, and it has therefore been relatively easy for white Zimbabweans to enter the UK. Other immigration routes include family reunification, false passports, or temporary work or student visas that are overstayed.

Difference in legal status matters greatly to how migrants consider return. We can follow legality to find three different groups of migrants. First, asylum-seekers and other irregular migrants, second, refugees – that is, asylum-seekers who have made a successful asylum claim – and, third, migrants with other types of legal status.

In February 2009, the Government of National

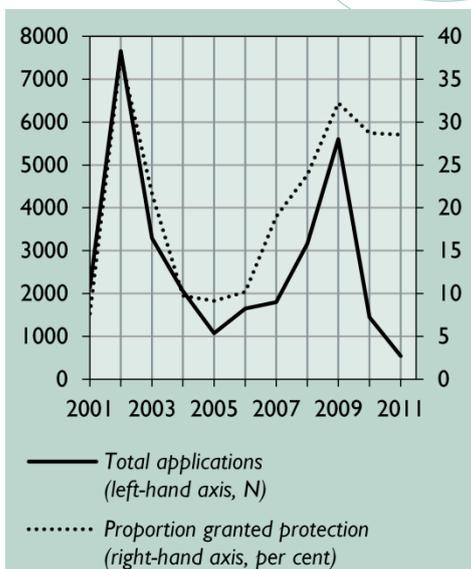


Figure 1. Zimbabwean asylum applications in the United Kingdom 2001–2011.¹

Unity (GNU) was established between ZANU-PF and the two MDC parties in Zimbabwe. Following this change in the political climate, many Zimbabweans in the UK have begun to consider the possibility of return. Diaspora members talk about investment in Zimbabwe, visits are taking place, and some migrants have returned on a more permanent basis.

The contents of this policy brief are based on interviews conducted with Zimbabwean migrants in 2012.² The interviews show that Zimbabwean migrants are generally ambivalent towards return. Unclear and changing return intentions are common; few of the migrants who say they intend to return present specific plans; and some seem outright uncomfortable about the question of whether they will return or stay. The policy brief offers explanations for the ambivalence shown by Zimbabweans in relation to return.

Zimbabwe's situation remains uncertain

For many Zimbabwean migrants, considerable uncertainty surrounds the question of whether to return to Zimbabwe. This can be viewed in terms of three key aspects.

First, Zimbabweans worry about the current economic conditions in Zimbabwe. As recently as 2009, Zimbabwe's unemployment rate was estimated at around 95%.³ The state of Zimbabwe's health service is also a matter for consideration. Public hospitals suffer from a lack of drugs and equipment, while private alternatives are not affordable for most people. However, when the current situation is compared with that of 2008–2009 – when Zimbabwe experienced hyperinflation, electoral and

There is uncertainty in the diaspora about the degree of political change in Zimbabwe

post-electoral violence, and a cholera outbreak – it is easy to see the positive change since then. Also economic statistics clearly indicate that a turnaround has taken place (see Figure 2).

Second, there is uncertainty in the diaspora about the degree of political change in Zimbabwe. Generally, Zimbabweans with refugee

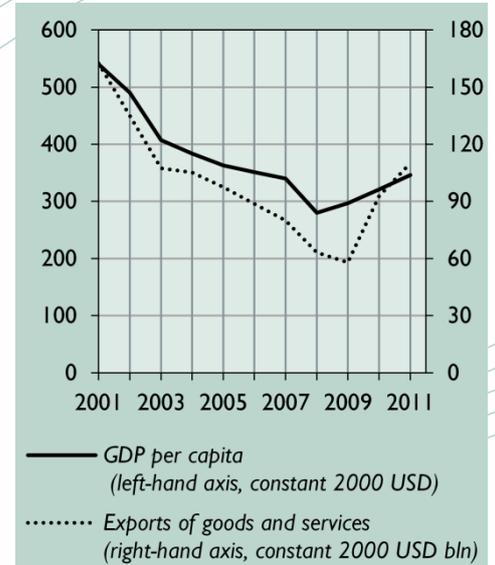


Figure 2. Indicators of economic turnaround in Zimbabwe.⁴

status believe that fears about return for security reasons are probably exaggerated. They base their beliefs on the visits of other refugees to Zimbabwe. Asylum-seekers, on the other hand, believe they would not be safe in Zimbabwe and deny that return is a possibil-

Denying the possibility of return is an important element in asylum claims

ity. This is not surprising, since denying the possibility of return is an important element of their claims for asylum. Zimbabwe's asylum-seekers, however, are not alone in questioning whether adequate political change has taken place in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean migrants generally believe that Zimbabwe's system of violence is still in place and could be used in the future. ZANU-PF continues to wield more power in government than the MDC, and it still controls the security arms of the state. Zimbabweans are afraid that violence will break out around the next election, scheduled to take place in 2013.

A third issue is the unpredictable nature of return. Most Zimbabweans in the UK have spent a long time away from home, and great changes have taken place since they left. They have also experienced personal change. While

they may dream of returning to a relaxing life where they lack nothing, it is acknowledged that a stable income in Zimbabwe will be difficult to guarantee. In fact, it is difficult to know what return will be like, other than that it will be a return to something new.

On account of this uncertainty, those migrants who do plan to return forge careful plans. These may involve an initial fact-finding stage before return, along with efforts to ensure that they have possible options for escape following return. Only migrants holding legal status can make clear return plans of this sort, as they have the right to re-migrate to the UK.

Settling in the UK is not easy

The Zimbabwean diaspora in the UK consists primarily of middle-class skilled migrants who had the financial means, support and connections to embark on long-distance travel. Sadly, many have experienced deskilling since emigration. They have experienced a period without legal status, and thereby without the right to work, or have had difficulty obtaining work. Deskilling may also mean that work is not obtained in the sector in which one used to be employed, but in another sector – for example care work. Unemployment or engagement in irregular work is common among Zimbabwean immigrants. Deskilling greatly affects migrants' opportunities both in the UK and in Zimbabwe, making it hard for them to sustain themselves in either place.

Zimbabwe: key dates

- 1980:** Independence from the United Kingdom
- 1980–2008:** Mugabe and Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) rule
- 2000:** Emergence of the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)
- 2000:** Vote against the referendum for a new constitution
- 2000–2009:** Crisis years of nationwide state violence and economic recession
- 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2008:** Violence peaks around elections
- 2008:** MDC wins national election
- 2009:** Government of National Unity (GNU) established

Zimbabweans who lack legal status in the UK have a particularly hard time. Coping with the lack of permission to work, poor housing and dependence on others for sustenance can be extremely challenging. Many asylum-seekers also feel very much alone in the UK. They lack adequate support from the British authorities, and lack of resources makes it difficult to keep in touch with family members in Zimbabwe.

While life in the UK may be challenging, Zimbabweans emphasize that it offers great opportunities for education and work. After a decade away, many Zimbabweans have settled in the UK with their families, some with British partners. For some, having children at British schools is a reason for postponing



return. However, while British schools are generally regarded as excellent, there are fears that children may lose their Zimbabwean identity and become British by attending them.

The idea that one risks losing one's Zimbabweanness by making a home in the UK is widespread. Even Zimbabweans who have stayed in the UK for several decades say that Zimbabwe is home and where they belong.

Lives and circumstances change

In addition to thinking about developments in Zimbabwe and the UK, migrants have to look at their own lives when considering return.

Emigration from Zimbabwe to the UK typically follows developments that give a push to leave: economic crisis, political threats, or life-cycle

events such as the death of someone close or a relationship breakup. Subsequently, though, many migrants have discovered opportunities in the UK. These might be study or work opportunities or the possibility of receiving medical care. Health problems and old age are

Even Zimbabweans who have stayed in the UK for several decades say that Zimbabwe is home

vital to return considerations for migrants who face these issues.

For other individuals, there are greater possibilities in Zimbabwe than in the UK. Zimbabwe is experiencing economic growth in certain sectors, which is creating new demands. There are well-known cases of returnees who have done well within IT, academia and other sectors.

Family is almost always important, but it affects return considerations in different ways. One Zimbabwean may have a transnational family, with children dispersed across the world, and will thus be well-placed to receive their visits in the UK; another may wish to return to a child that was left behind in Zimbabwe; while a third may have settled down with a British partner.

Return is not simply a personal choice

In addition to considering the situation in Zimbabwe and in the UK, many Zimbabwean migrants are influenced by what people around them think. Three such communal influences are particularly strong.

First, Zimbabweans who are still in Zimbabwe expect that migrants will return wealthy. This expectation stems from a Zimbabwean tradition of successful labour emigration and studies abroad. Many Zimbabwean migrants themselves feel that returning without wealth is shameful. It is therefore common to pretend that one is doing well in the UK and to postpone return in order to conceal the harsh reality of life there.

Second, there are various opinions about return within the diaspora itself, particularly

about how important it is to feel a sense of belonging to Zimbabwe. Some migrants speak of belonging to Zimbabwe as the 'right' identity as opposed to the 'wrong' identity of finding belonging in the UK. For some, especially among the politically active, this identity translates into a commitment to return, because

Some migrants speak of belonging to Zimbabwe as the 'right' identity

helping to rebuild Zimbabwe is the diaspora's duty. This duty is not only felt at a personal level, but can also be projected to fellow diasporans, who may be urged to stop highlighting uncertainties and to go back home.

Lastly, there are also narratives about the impossibility of return. It is widely held within the Zimbabwean community that asylum-seekers cannot return. This is surprising, however, since Zimbabweans seem generally to be of the opinion that few asylum-seekers are 'genuine refugees'. But, while there is little sympathy for the political claims of many asylum-seekers, there is sympathy with them regarding return. Migrants with legal status explain that return does not allow for future mobility on the part of migrants without such status and, more importantly, that the poverty experienced by irregular migrants in the UK will give them a bad start in Zimbabwe.

There are dilemmas around return

Ambivalence reflects the fact that return is a complex and difficult process. However, it is possible to identify specific dilemmas in which Zimbabwean migrants find themselves.

First, although Zimbabwe is no longer considered to be in crisis, Zimbabwean migrants

are uncertain about the scale of change at home. People who have visited tell stories about real improvement and opportunities, but these stories contrast with the widespread belief that a system of violence is still intact. Moreover, Zimbabweans will not forget how rapidly Zimbabwe went from being a prosperous southern African country to a country in total crisis. There is thus the question of which 'reality' to trust; that of change or that of persistent uncertainty. The way out of this dilemma is only an option for migrants holding legal status in the UK, as it is possible for them to forge a cautious return plan with an escape route of re-emigration.

Second, the contrast between expectations about returning rich and Zimbabweans' situation in the UK creates ambivalence about return. Many Zimbabwean migrants have become deskilled and relatively poor in the UK compared to what they were when they

Those who can forge a cautious return plan with an escape route of re-emigration

left Zimbabwe. Poverty is especially concerning when compared to what was expected by migrants and their relatives. The pressure to meet expectations can weigh so heavily that many migrants opt to stay in the UK against their own wishes and better judgement.

A third dilemma is that opportunities found in the UK contrast with the discourse of belonging to Zimbabwe. It is very difficult for Zimbabweans to admit to finding a home in the UK because they feel that this endangers their Zimbabweanness. The dilemma is complicated

by Britain being the former colonial power and a place where Zimbabweans experience hardship and discrimination. The pressure behind the dilemma of belonging not only stems from the wider community, but also comes from within each individual migrant.

A fourth dilemma is that, for some Zimbabwean migrants, the sense of duty to return is so strong that economic obstacles or even fear of returning appear to be invalid excuses. While it is acknowledged that asylum-seekers are unable to return and can reply to the question of return with a simple 'I cannot', those who feel they 'should' be making return plans are left struggling with the uncertainty.

Such dilemmas create powerful feelings of ambivalence in relation to return. ■

For further reading

McGregor, J and Primorac, R (eds) (2010) *Zimbabwe's New Diaspora: Displacement and the Cultural Politics of Survival*. Oxford: Berghahn.

Mortensen, EB (2012) 'Zimbabwean migrants considering return', dissertation for MSc in Global Migration. London: UCL.

Pasura, D (2010) 'Competing meanings of the diaspora: The case of Zimbabweans in Britain', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36(9): 1445–61.

Notes

1 Data source: UK Home Office (2012) *Immigration Statistics*. **2** Interviews were conducted with 18 Zimbabwean migrants in Greater London in 2012. Interviewees were selected to achieve diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, year of arrival in the UK, legal status, family situation, engagement in diaspora organizations and politics, and experiences with return. **3** Central Intelligence Agency (2012) *The World Factbook*. **4** Data source: World Bank (2012) *World Development Indicators*.

THE AUTHOR

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THE PROJECT

This Policy Brief is part of the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration' (PREMIG), a large-scale research project that explores return migration from Norway and the United Kingdom. The project is led by Research Professor Jørgen Carling. For more information, see www.prio.no/premig.

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