ZIMBABWEANS AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN ECONOMY

"They do not want us in their country, yet we contribute significantly"
(havatide havo munyika mavo asi vanotida)

Tariro Chivige
Cape Peninsula University of Technology,
tariro.chivige@gmail.com

Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp
Sonoma State University
alfaro.velcamp@sonoma.edu

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Abstract

"They do not want us in their country, yet we contribute significantly," shared a Zimbabwean woman in the Cape Town region of South Africa**.** The economic turmoil in Zimbabwe has led to decades of immigration to South Africa with no clear resolution to migration in sight. Despite legal challenges and xenophobic backlash, Zimbabweans believe their impact on South Africa has been substantial. Xenophobia is defined by a host country's citizenry expressing anti-foreign sentiments implicitly through commentary or explicitly through escalation into violent attacks. The authors engaged 56 Zimbabweans with a 30-question questionnaire covering basic demographic information, employment-related inquiries, financial, and income-related matters. These were distributed among respondents from various socio-economic sectors. The research findings provide insights into Zimbabwean spending patterns and overall perspectives on living and working in South Africa. With this research and the study of recent court rulings in South Africa, the authors argue that despite the xenophobic atmosphere, Zimbabwean immigrants are contributing to the South African economy and the social fabric. The theoretical underpinning of xenophobia in this article is that although foreigners are not welcome in South Africa, the data reveal that Zimbabwean economic contributions in South Africa complicate a narrow

interpretation of xenophobia and suggest more multi-layered sentiments of both wanting and rejecting foreigners in the economy. Moreover, as the situation in Zimbabwe continues to deteriorate, South Africa looks to be their long-term place of residence. How South Africa handles Zimbabwean immigrants in the future offers an opportunity to reset current immigration policies and support economic growth in the region.

Keywords: Migrants, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Operation Dudula, ZEP, Economy

1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s, the political and economic crises in Zimbabwe have resulted in the migration of Zimbabweans all over the world. Following the March 2008 Zimbabwean elections, President Robert Mugabe cracked down on political opponents, forcing some Zimbabweans to flee for their lives and warranting refugee status (HRW, 2008). For many other Zimbabweans, the unfavourable economic landscape prompted migration. Today, it is estimated that more than five million Zimbabweans are residing outside their country (Moyo 2021, 335-370). Initially, many immigrants intended to return to Zimbabwe when the situation improved. Despite nearly two decades since the onset of Zimbabwe's economic crisis, Zimbabweans continue to confront a highly corrupt regime, goods and services priced in U.S dollars while workers are paid in Zimbabwean dollars, and high levels of inflation. These factors contribute to many Zimbabweans migrating to South Africa in the hope of better economic opportunities (Quora 2015). The August 2023 Zimbabwean African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) presidential re-election dashed the hope for economic improvements and prompted more people to leave the country in search of better opportunities. (Muronzi 2023).

The economic component of Zimbabwean migration can be explained by the persistent inflation which contributes to the high rate of poverty and vulnerability (World Bank 2023). This economic turmoil has led to immigration to South Africa with no clear resolution in sight. Furthermore, diplomatic relations between South Africa and Zimbabwe are strained, with Pretoria accusing Harare of neglecting the plight of its citizens and compelling immigrants to come to South Africa. For South Africa, immigrants from Zimbabwe challenge its limited resources intended for its citizens. Zimbabweans are perceived as uncontrolled waves of migrants "flooding" and "swamping" South Africa and are sometimes called "*makwerekwere*" (a term

used to refer to foreigners, often considered derogatory and can carry negative connotations). Yet, Zimbabweans with established families and strong ties in South Africa, formed over twenty years, consider South Africa their primary residence. Most Zimbabweans in South Africa are seeking economic opportunities which often contribute to the South African economy.

This article builds on the works of Crush (2017) and Moyo and Nzima (2017, 335-370) to examine the Zimbabweans' economic and social contributions to the South African economy. The questions encompassed basic demographic information, employment-related inquiries, financial and income-related matters, as well as social contexts. The questionnaires were distributed among respondents from various socio-economic sectors to collect data on the general characteristics of Zimbabwean immigrants, including age, gender, marital status, and educational background. Additionally, the questionnaires aimed to capture information on their professional details, such as employment status, industry, and job roles. Furthermore, the questionnaires sought to elicit information about their spending patterns and overall perspectives on living and working in South Africa.

With these questionnaires and the study of recent court rulings in South Africa, the authors argue that despite the xenophobic atmosphere, Zimbabwean immigrants are contributing to the South African economy and social fabric. The theoretical underpinning of xenophobia in this article is that although foreigners are not welcome in South Africa, the data reveal that Zimbabwean economic contributions in South Africa complicate a narrow interpretation of xenophobia and suggest more multi-layered sentiments of both wanting and rejecting foreigners in the economy. Moreover, as the situation in Zimbabwe continues to deteriorate, South Africa looks to be their long-term place of residence.

The article begins by providing an account of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa since the early 2000s. The second section offers an overview of literature related to the topic, followed by a description of the study's methodology. The final section presents the results and discusses the study's findings, providing recommendations on how to address the issue of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. The paper is based on surveys and selected interviews with over 50 Zimbabweans residing in the Cape Town metropolitan area. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and is on file with the authors. Due to legal status concerns, full names were not requested from participants.

2. Background

South Africa, due to its middle-income status, stable democratic institutions, and relatively industrialised economy, acts as the host to the largest number of immigrants on the African continent (Relief Web 2021). Official estimates suggest that the country is home to approximately 2.4 million immigrants, constituting three per cent of the overall population of 62 million people (StatsSA Census 2022, 31). It is, however, widely believed that this number is an underestimate due to the significant presence of unauthorised migrants, particularly from neighbouring countries (Moyo 2021, 335-370). Attuned to the demography of those living in the country, South African functionaries in some ministries have aimed to limit immigrants and those admitted into the formal labour market. Immigration policies aim to limit critical skills permits, general work permits, and business permits, which enable foreigners to reside in the country and engage in various business and economic activities.

In 2017 the South African government White Paper on International Migration aimed to align migration policies with labour market needs (Department of Home Affairs [DHA] 2017). The DHA moved toward narrower and more restrictive enforcement. These immigration restrictions for economic migrants have resulted in the asylum-seeker path as the default immigration option. This development has raised concerns as it has created challenges for most migrants attempting to legalise their presence in South Africa and it is linked to the deprivation of a legal right to work in the country (Carciotto et al. 2018).

In April 2009 the South African government introduced the Dispensation of Zimbabweans Project (ZDP/DZP) to regularise the status of thousands of Zimbabweans who had migrated to South Africa to escape political and economic instability between 2007 and 2009. The program received over 295,000 applications and over 245,000 were issued. Upon inception, the DHA issued the primary objectives of the ZDP as follows: regularise the status of Zimbabweans residing illegally in South Africa; prevent the deportation of Zimbabweans who were in the country illegally; alleviate pressure on the asylum seeker and refugee regime; and grant amnesty to Zimbabweans who had fraudulently obtained South African documents (DHA.org 2014).

In 2014, when the initial Dispensation of Zimbabweans Project (DZP) was set

1 The research project received approval from the Faculty of Law Research Ethics Committee at the University of Cape Town on 14 November 2022. (L100011NS -2022).

to expire, the South African government decided to reissue the permits. One of the reasons cited was that "most Zimbabweans who were granted this permit were not yet ready to return home" (DHA 2014). The DZP was valid until 2014, after which it was succeeded by the Zimbabwean Special Dispensation Permit (ZSP). Subsequently, the ZSP was replaced by the Zimbabwean Exemption Permit (ZEP), effective from September 2017 to December 2021. In November 2021, however, the Minister of the DHA decided to cancel the ZEP altogether. To address the concerns of the ZEP holders, the DHA functionaries granted a 12-month grace period that was extended until 31 December 2022. During this time, the permit beneficiaries were given the option to apply for a mainstream visa or leave the country. In September 2022 the DHA further extended the ZEP permits by another six months until June 2023. This extension created significant anxiety and uncertainty among the permit holders, as they were unsure about their future status in the country. The Helen Suzman Foundation and Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa challenged the DHA decision to terminate the ZEP program. In June 2023, the Gauteng High Court in Pretoria ruled against the decision, holding that the termination of the permits was invalid, unlawful, and unconstitutional. This ruling came about because the Minister of Home Affairs was deemed not to have followed a fair process, which should have included consultation with and an opportunity for ZEP holders to make representations. The South African Minister of Home Affairs filed an application to appeal to the Supreme Court of Appeal which was dismissed in October 2023.

According to reports from the Zimbabwe Community in South Africa and the Zimbabwe Migrants Support Network, a considerable number of ZEP holders are low-wage workers who do not meet the criteria for obtaining work permits. They provide the needed labour and expertise in the various work sectors. Their inability to apply for a work visa prohibits them from a regulatory waiver (Mhaka 2023). As a result, many Zimbabwean immigrants are forced to reside and work in South Africa without legal status.

In addition, an estimated 15,000 migrants and refugees from Zimbabwe and other countries enter South Africa daily through official border posts or illegal crossing points, as reported by MSF (2021). The Zimbabwean population in South Africa is estimated to range from one million to five million individuals (Polzer 2008, 1-28). Within this population, approximately 245,000 were documented under the Zimbabwe Exemption Permit (ZEP). This could suggest that as many as 750,000 Zimbabweans in South Africa are undocumented. According to the South African 2022 census, over 1 million

Zimbabweans are living in South Africa which is roughly 45% of the immigrant population (StatsSA Census 2022, 31). As with all undocumented immigrants, Zimbabweans who lack legal status cannot access local bank accounts and confront the inability to secure regular, formal employment. Despite these challenges, Zimbabweans contribute to the South African economy through purchasing goods and services and working in the informal economy. Many ZEP holders are employed in the formal sector and contribute tax payments to the South African Revenue Service (SARS). If the ZEP permits are not renewed, the 178,421 ZEP holders (as estimated by Mateko 2022), would cease paying taxes. Although the potential loss of tax revenue has not been calculated by SARS, it could hurt the already debt-ridden South African economy.

2.1 Significance of Zimbabwean immigrants in South Africa

South Africa's economic position in the South African Development Community (SADC) has drawn immigrants from the African continent. The arrival of African immigrants has drawn the attention of unemployed South Africans, a group that was recorded at 32.9% in the first quarter of 2023 (StatsSA 2023). Operation Dudula originally branched off from a faction within the "Put South Africans First movement" (Myeni, 2022) and has instilled fear among immigrants through its anti-immigrant campaigns on social media. This xenophobic movement has transitioned to on-ground actions. Many Zimbabweans feel targeted by members of Operation Dudula because they are the largest immigrant group in South Africa. The Operation Dudula campaign is rooted in concerns over the strain on public health services, job opportunities, and social welfare programs attributed to what they see as an "influx of illegal immigrants." The group strongly denies being a xenophobic vigilante organisation (BBC News Africa 2023). Instead, they assert that their mission is to "clean up communities" and "create opportunities" for marginalised South Africans due to perceived government neglect.

The Operation Dudula campaign, which has now become a political party (Allison 2023), has caused many immigrants to live in constant fear, especially with regard to their legal status in South Africa. Operation Dudula members have been vocal in opposing the extension of the ZEP program, arguing that undocumented immigrants worsen the crime situation. Operation Dudula has contributed to negative perceptions of casting Zimbabweans as potentially dangerous and associated with criminal activities in South Africa (Ellis 2023).

Economic theories of migration shed light on the interplay between xenophobia and economic development. Neoclassical theories of migration, such as those articulated by Sjaastad (1962), posit that migrants are drawn to destinations offering higher wages and better job prospects compared to their home countries. However, this pursuit of economic opportunity can fuel xenophobia in destination countries, as native-born citizens perceive migrants as competitors for limited resources like jobs and social services, leading to tension and hostility.`

The New Economics of Migration theory, as outlined by Porumbescu (2015), presents a more nuanced perspective. This theory suggests that migration decisions are often collective, driven by communities or households seeking to maximise income and employment while minimizing risks. From this viewpoint, immigrants are not just competitors but also contributors to economic development. They fill labour shortages, bring valuable skills and entrepreneurship, and stimulate growth in sectors of the economy. Additionally, immigrants can enhance consumer demand and cultural diversity, fostering innovation and productivity.

Overall, while xenophobia may arise from perceived competition between native-born citizens and immigrants, immigrants also play a pivotal role in driving economic development. Understanding the economic dynamics of migration and immigrants' contributions can help to address xenophobia and leverage immigration for economic growth and prosperity.

With the sluggish growth of the South African economy since the global financial crisis of 2008, job creation has been insufficient, contributing to chronic job insecurity among unemployed South Africans. The labour market is characterised by challenges of widespread unemployment and a simultaneous, unsatisfied demand for skilled workers. To address these issues, government policies prioritise employment and human resource development, as evident in several long-term labour market targets, while also dealing with macroeconomic challenges, including low growth and high budget deficits. The South African labour market requires both skilled and unskilled workers, necessitating an exploration of immigrants' contributions in various sectors, including informal employment.

3. Literature Review

Academic scholarship on immigrant economic contributions tends to rely on macroeconomic data and human rights law. These sources remain valuable as this article begins a discussion on the Zimbabwean economic contributions to South Africa with ethnographic data.

In the global economy, immigrant labour has become increasingly important leading to a surge in immigrant workers seeking employment opportunities in other

countries (ILO 2017). The presence of immigrants in the workforce has broader effects on economic growth, benefiting local and national economies. This in turn results in rising wage levels for native-born workers (Nijkamp and Poot 2015, 203-229). The ILO estimates that approximately 244 million immigrants worldwide, representing 3.3 per cent of the global population, and nearly half of them being women, contribute to the labour force (ILO 2017). Moreover, many low-skilled workers often face exploitative working conditions with limited access to human and labour rights. Their vulnerability is particularly acute within the informal economy because of heightened susceptibility to exploitation and abuse (ILO 2017).

Concerning South Africa, according to a study conducted by the OECD (OECD Development Centre—International Labour Organization project on Assessing the Economic Contribution of Labour Migration in Developing Countries as Countries of Destination), immigrants contribute to the country's economy in three distinct ways: labour markets, economic growth, and public finance (OECD 2018). The report highlights that immigrants are well-integrated into the South African labour market, with employment and unemployment rates similar to those of native-born workers. What is key is that the immigrants do not displace native-born workers, yet they are often employed at higher rates relative to the host country's generally low employment rate. According to the report, immigrants tend to fill occupations with high growth rates, reflecting demand-driven immigration patterns. Education levels among immigrant workers show polarisation at the lower and higher ends compared to native-born South Africans. While immigrants initially had a higher share of tertiary education, this advantage has decreased over time as education levels among the native-born population have improved. The presence of immigrant workers does not significantly impact native-born employment at the national level, but there are varying effects at the sub-national level.

The OECD analysis further notes that immigrant workers can also have both negative effects, such as lower employment rates among native-born workers, and positive effects, such as higher incomes, for the native-born population. Interestingly, the presence of new immigrants who have been in South Africa for less than ten years, appears to increase both the employment rate and the incomes of South African-born workers (OECD 2018).

The report also suggests that immigration has a net positive impact on South Africa's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. The econometric model estimates indicated that immigrant workers may contribute to increasing the country's income per capita

by up to 5%. The higher educational attainment of foreign-born workers, their larger representation in the working age population, and the potential for increased total factor productivity through efficiency gains, such as labour force specialisation, could explain this positive impact (OECD 2018). Immigrants reportedly have a positive net impact on the South African government's fiscal balance as well. They tend to pay more in taxes, particularly in income and value-added taxes. In 2011, the per capita net fiscal contribution of immigrants ranged between 17% under the average cost scenario and 27% under the marginal cost scenario. In contrast, native-born individuals contributed -8% under both scenarios (OECD 2018).

However, it is essential to note that not all Zimbabwean immigrants in South Africa are lawfully present and earning a decent living. In the Limpopo Province of South Africa, that borders Zimbabwe, locals claim that the influx of refugees and illegal foreigners from Zimbabwe puts a strain on their local labour market, leading to frustration. Many also assert that foreign nationals do not contribute anything significant to the South African economy (MSF 2021). Nevertheless, Mateko (2022) found that Zimbabweans helped in employment creation, increased supply of other services, infrastructure development, new business setups, transfer of skills, increased labour supply, and tax revenue. Similarly, Facchini et al. (2013, 15-29) conducted a study assessing the impact of immigration on native-born employment in South Africa. They found small negative effects of immigration on the income of native-born workers at the national level, but no significant impact on employment. At the district level, they observed a reverse pattern, with a negative effect on employment, but not on income.

According to Mathekga (2022), the reasons why many people are leaving Zimbabwe include seeking better living conditions and providing for their families. This is evident in the remittances of money back home by Zimbabwean immigrants, indicating their intention to maintain ties with their roots while working in South Africa (Polzer 2008, 1-28). Hungwe (2020, 54-76) also argues that the level of economic stability of Zimbabwean workers within the South African job market is the major pull factor into South Africa. This attractiveness of the labour market, however, exposes workers, especially those in career-less and unstable jobs to harsh exploitative working conditions.

Like Hungwe (2020, 54-76) and Polzer (2008, 1-28), Crush et al. (2018) have revealed that a significant proportion of Zimbabwean immigrants in South Africa are young males, compelled to migrate due to economic hardship, unemployment, and political persecution. For many of these immigrants, the South African informal economy offers a vital source of employment, particularly in the retail, trade, and wholesale sectors

(Crush et al. 2018). Crush's 2018 study on Zimbabwean migration in South Africa further highlights the complex dynamics of migration and xenophobia. The study describes a significant percentage of Zimbabwean immigrants involved in the informal economy, noting the role of the informal sector for Zimbabweans living in South Africa. In analysing the effects of illegal immigrant workers, particularly domestic workers from Zimbabwe in South Africa, Vanyoro (2019, 24-39) emphasises the importance of protecting foreign or local workers in informal workspaces. The study concludes that all domestic workers operating in informal settings require protection. Failure to address the issues faced by immigrant domestic workers could lead to a deterioration of working conditions and standards across the sector, putting all domestic workers at risk of exploitation and economic precarity. Thus, foreign workers also become subject to the existing conditions in different workspaces, and the challenges are not exclusive to South Africans, as complaints about foreigners causing problems are also prevalent in informal workspaces.

Furthermore, most studies that focus on Zimbabwean workers in South Africa tend to agree on one critical aspect: many workers, whether in informal or formal work, face exploitative working conditions, and the situation becomes even worse when one is undocumented. Unfortunately, obtaining valid work visas, which might afford some modicum of better protection, poses significant challenges due to the stringent immigration policies in South Africa (Baison, 2021). Building on the theme of challenges that Zimbabweans face in South Africa, Mateko (2022, 11-18) describes the fear of deportation, difficulties in securing working visas, lack of access to legal help, accommodation issues, xenophobia, marginalisation, segregation, discrimination, irregular incomes, short maternity leave, zero maternity leave benefits, non-payment of salaries, underpayment of wages, and lack of work permits. Studies by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) emphasise the need for further research on the effects of migration in destination countries and such discriminatory practices.

4. Methodology: Understanding Zimbabwean Immigrants in the study

The authors designed a primary data collection—a survey questionnaire that was distributed to 60 individuals of whom 56 responsed. One person requested the destruction of their questionnaire due to concerns about being identified as undocumented.

The questionnaire presented 30 questions covering a wide range of topics. These questions encompassed basic demographic information, employment-related inquiries,

financial and income-related matters, as well as social contexts. The questionnaire was distributed in a paper format among respondents from various socioeconomic sectors to collect data on the general characteristics of Zimbabwean immigrants, including age, gender, marital status, and educational backgrounds. Additionally, the questionnaire was intended to capture information on their professional details, such as employment status, industry, and job roles, and to elicit information about spending patterns and overall perspectives on living and working in South Africa.

The locations selected for data collection primarily included Zimbabwean churches in Cape Town. These data collection sites encompassed a diverse cross-section of the Zimbabwean community. Churches are known for attracting people from various backgrounds, ensuring a wide range of participants in the study. The research team visited Zimbabwean churches in Milnerton and Bellville Towns, explaining the study's purpose and its significance to potential respondents. Interested participants completed questionnaires voluntarily on Sundays in May and June 2023. At the time of the research, the Gauteng High Court had not yet ruled that the DHA Minister had acted unconstitutionally regarding ZEP holders. Interested individuals were also invited for interviews, either immediately after completing the questionnaire or at a later scheduled time.

A combination of random and snowball sampling methods was employed to select respondents and to ensure that the sample represented a significant portion of the Zimbabwean immigrant population. The snowballing technique involved encouraging participating respondents to refer other interested Zimbabweans to contribute to the research, enabling the inclusion of individuals who might not have been reached through traditional random sampling methods. Twelve interviews were conducted between April 2023 and July 2023 to gain a deeper understanding of various aspects discussed in the study. These interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for open-ended questions and follow-up inquiries. This approach facilitated more comprehensive and nuanced responses, affording the researchers a richer understanding of the perspectives of Zimbabwean immigrants. Often, the immigrants felt more comfortable sharing their experiences through interviews following participation in the questionnaire survey component of the research.

The quantitative data from the questionnaires were entered into statistical software, Eviews, to generate descriptive statistics and identify trends and patterns in the responses. The qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and then subjected to thematic analysis to identify key themes and narratives related to the experiences of Zimbabwean immigrants.

Limitations

The sampling technique employed could introduce bias in respondent selection. The research focused on a specific geographic area, namely the City of Cape Town. This narrow scope might limit the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of Zimbabwean immigrants in South Africa. Therefore, the study provides a snapshot of the Zimbabwean experience in the Western Province, but it may not apply to all the Zimbabwean people living and working in South Africa.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Demographic Representation

The study respondents included 15 male and 41 female respondents, which contrasts with Crush's (2018) findings that indicated a predominance of male Zimbabwean immigrants in South Africa. The age range of the respondents was quite diverse. The youngest participant was 18 years old and had moved to South Africa at the age of 16, two years before the study. In contrast, the oldest participant was 60 years old, having moved to South Africa in 1996 when they were only 33 years old. Among the other most senior respondents, one relocated 16 years ago and another only two years before the interview. The median age of the respondents was 35 years, with 35 also being the mode age. Thirteen respondents were in the age range of 40 to 49, while only three fell between the ages of 50 and 60. Twenty-six respondents were between 30 and 39 years old, eight were between 21 and 29, and one respondent was below the age of 20. The length of time spent in South Africa varied among the respondents, ranging from two to 27 years. The majority of respondents had lived in South Africa for over 10 years, indicating a substantial period of residence.

5.2 Reasons for Migrating to South Africa

Questionnaire response data indicate that the majority of respondents can be broadly classified as economic migrants. "Economic migrants" can be defined as individuals entering a state to engage in economic activities such as investors or business travellers. However, economic immigrants can also be understood in a narrower sense, similar to the category of "labour migrant" (Simon et al. 2015). Seventy-one percent of

respondents reported that their primary reasons for migrating to South Africa were to support their families and meet their financial needs. They stated that they had moved to South Africa because they needed to provide for their families through any available job and business opportunities. Only four per cent of the respondents mentioned that they initially relocated to South Africa for educational purposes. While seeking employment was also the top priority for them, most were even willing to start their own informal businesses and become self-employed to make a living. Sixty-four per cent of the respondents indicated that they reside in South Africa with their families. This illustrates how many have established South Africa as their home after emigrating from Zimbabwe with their entire families.

The age of the respondents varied as noted above. One respondent mentioned that they first relocated to South Africa when they were just 14 years old, and now have no intention of returning to their home country as they now consider South Africa as their permanent residence. A 44-year-old woman who moved in 2018 explained that, despite her age, she felt compelled to leave Zimbabwe because there were no job opportunities available back in Zimbabwe. As a widow, she had to provide for her children. Since relocating to South Africa, she has not been able to secure any formal employment. Instead, she decided to become self-employed by setting up a vegetable stall where she sells vegetables in her local community in Dunoon. Through this venture, she has managed to send her children to school. Although she earns an average of R3000 per month, it is sufficient for her, especially compared to what she could have earned in Zimbabwe, given that her highest educational qualification is an Ordinary Level Certificate.

The oldest respondent in the study, a 60-year-old woman, reported that she initially relocated to South Africa in 1996. Since then, she has been self-employed as a vendor. Now that she has reached retirement age, she is eagerly looking forward to returning to her home country to retire. The second oldest respondents in the study were two individuals, both 57 years old. The first individual, a male, relocated to South Africa 16 years ago. He is a seasoned civil engineer who has successfully established a consulting firm, employing six people. Additionally, he is in a partnership with a South African engineer. His initial reason for moving to South Africa all those years ago was to find employment, and over time, he has not only found a job but has also built a life and a family in the country.

5.3 Employment Statuses and Economic Contributions

For many, the goal of migration – namely, to secure a job and to provide for their families

– has been achieved. Fifty-four per cent of the respondents reported that they were formally employed, covering a wide variety of careers, including engineering, academia, accounting, and trade skills such as plumbing and carpentry. They all described making significant contributions to the South African tax base by paying employment taxes to the South African Revenue Services (SARS).

In the informal sector, there are domestic workers and caregivers, with some having established small backyard businesses. According to Hussmanns, "informal employment encompasses the following situations: own-account workers and employers in their own informal sector enterprises, own-account workers producing solely for their households, contributing family workers, members of informal producers' co-operatives and employees holding informal jobs (that is, if their employment is not subject to for example national labour law)" (Hussmanns 2004, 3). These individuals play a vital role in the social fabric of the South African economy. Many become integral parts of South African families, and some are even involved in raising their employers' children. A significant number of respondents engaged in informal work also mentioned that they have ventured into entrepreneurship. For instance, one respondent who works as a plumber, shared that they left formal employment due to the low salaries they were receiving and their desire to start their own business. They have successfully established their own plumbing business, employing seven individuals, four of whom are South Africans. Additionally, they diligently fulfil the tax obligations related to their business by paying their taxes to SARS.

In terms of tax contributions, 55% of the respondents disclosed that they earn no more than R24 000 per month. However, a significant number also earn more than R24 000 per month, placing them in the upper middle and top echelons of society, illustrating a range of income levels among Zimbabweans. Approximately 40% of the respondents stated that they contribute to SARS through Pay-As-You-Earn (PAYE) taxes. More than 18% of the respondents reported paying over R100 000 in PAYE tax annually. One respondent mentioned paying over R200 000 per annum in taxes related to their business. While these numbers represent only a small subset of the respondents, when combined they provide a signal of the significance of the Zimbabweans' contributions to the South African economy.

Many Zimbabweans contribute to the South African economy through various means, such as job creation, paying taxes to SARS, and even through rental payments. More than 50% of the respondents indicated that they pay over R5000

per month for their accommodation, either in the form of rent or mortgage payments. Housing, particularly for individuals with lower income, remains a prominent issue, with rent being one of the highest expenses for many. Among the respondents, 71% reported living in houses, with only seven per cent stating that they reside in shacks. As one respondent aptly put it, their contributions extend beyond their work and taxes, as they also stimulate economic activity through their housing-related expenditures. Translated from Shona, she stated "South Africans may not want us in their country, but we contribute significantly through the rent we pay and the transportation services we use." (*….havatide hedu munyika mavo asi vanotida, takavakoshera, Deno tisipo (foreigners) imba dzavo dzaigara ani and ma Taxi ndiani aikwira…"*). This aspect of money circulation in the housing market has not been fully explored in the literature.

In an overwhelming consensus among the respondents, 99% of them felt that they are making a positive contribution to the South African economy in one way or another. They believe this is particularly true as they offer their services in industries or job sectors that may not typically be attractive to native South Africans. One respondent shared her decade-long experience as a domestic worker in South Africa. She has remained employed by the same family since her arrival, initially caring for their single child and now looking after their two children, with the youngest being eight years old. Her sense of contribution extends beyond an economic frame and indicates an element of assimilation into South African society. Remarkably, 25% of the respondents reported that they had worked as domestic workers at some point. In their roles they have not only raised their employers' children but also taken care of their employers' families, enabling many of the families for whom they have worked to engage in other economic activities. This effectively frees up South Africa's labour force to participate in broader economic endeavours. Additionally, only seven per cent of the respondents mentioned that they had been in South Africa since they began their undergraduate studies. Notably, one of them graduated with an Honours degree in 2012 and has since earned a Doctoral degree while still residing in South Africa. Another individual, a respondent who initially moved to South Africa as an accounting undergraduate student, is now a chartered accountant working as an auditor for one of the country's most prestigious organisations. These stories highlight how deeply entrenched Zimbabweans have become in South Africa.

5.4 Employment Opportunities and Related Challenges

The respondents' educational backgrounds ranged from those with only secondary education to those holding doctoral degrees. This diversity highlights that Zimbabweans in South Africa are positioned to pursue a wide range of employment opportunities. Contrary to Operation Dudula's statements, Zimbabweans are not taking jobs away from locals, rather they are also filling scarce skills employment positions. Moreover, a considerable number of respondents fall under the "critical skills" category, indicating that they are making contributions to the South African economy in areas of specific needs. Zimbabweans, like other immigrants, fulfil the critical skills job positions that the South African Government states as important to the country. According to Sidimba (2023), "the majority of those who are unemployed (in South Africa) are not highly skilled and are not competing for the same vacancies at the global talent South Africa should attract to close the skills gap."

One persistent issue is that South African immigration regulations present—or seem to present—a formidable barrier to Zimbabweans. The respondents indicated a nearly unanimous consensus that possessing the necessary "paper" or visas authorising employment in South Africa is the most straightforward route to securing a job. Yet, the DHA often creates obstacles for qualified individuals seeking work permits, lengthening the visa application procedures, for example. One respondent recounted the loss of a job opportunity when attempting to modify their visa conditions, which were linked to their then-current employer. This process extended over three months, resulting in the prospective employer rescinding their offer due to the unresolved visa conditions. Another participant shared their ordeal of facing an average of four visa application rejections, with reasons that appeared arbitrary and unsupported by legal grounds. These rejections compelled the applicant to invest substantial amounts in reapplications and legal consultations before finally obtaining the visa. According to the Vulindlela report under President Cyril Ramaphosa, during the period between 2015 and 2021 over 68% of visa applications faced rejection (Vulindlela 2022). From 2014 to 2021, only 25,298 visas were approved across the various visa categories (Vulindlela 2022). A notable portion of the respondents, at least 25%, reported encountering hurdles during their visa application processes. Delays in visa processing pose a significant disadvantage for those eligible for various visa types, occasionally leading to missed job and educational opportunities. Over eight per cent of the respondents explicitly stated that they had missed job and educational opportunities due to delays in visa processing.

In addition to visa immigration hurdles, the Zimbabwean respondents described discriminatory behaviour, often from their colleagues and sometimes even from employers, resulting in lower wages than South African nationals earn. Yet, the respondents in manual or labour-intensive jobs such as waiters or salon workers reported that their employers openly preferred hiring foreign labour. This preference stemmed from the perception that foreign workers are more willing to work longer hours and on more days compared to local workers who are perceived as attuned to their labour and union rights. The theoretical notion that xenophobia is multi-layered and both welcomes and rejects foreigners, particularly Zimbabweans, broadens traditional approaches to anti-foreign sentiments in the South African economy. More than ten per cent of respondents faced challenges securing promotions at work due to their foreign status despite having the required qualifications, which hinders them from voicing concerns or seeking better opportunities. Yet, the need for employment compels them to remain in South Africa despite these difficulties and the high cost of living.

5.5 Why Zimbabweans are not leaving South Africa

The respondents often expressed conflicting sentiments about living in South Africa. They reported that the country offers ample career opportunities compared to Zimbabwe, which serves as a significant pull factor for immigration. Beyond the higher salaries associated with employment in South Africa, there are also prospects for career advancement that entice more Zimbabweans to relocate and for others to remain. South Africa also provides opportunities for career growth and skills development, and some respondents have benefited from employers' willingness to hire foreigners.

Although some employers prefer foreigners (Zimbabweans in particular), this can sometimes make the Zimbabwean workers targets of discrimination. Given this vulnerability, 20% of the respondents mentioned that they refrain from speaking their mother tongue in public to avoid being identified as foreigners and to mitigate potential xenophobic attacks. Zimbabwean immigrants often feel that discussions pertaining to "foreigner" in South Africa inherently refer to them, leaving them vulnerable to potential xenophobic incidents. Despite the highly visible Operation Dudula, none of the respondents explicitly mentioned it, which seems to suggest how deeply ingrained xenophobic sentiments have become in everyday life. This heightened sense of vulnerability results in a persistent state of fear, as Zimbabwean immigrants believe that any negative events attributed to foreigners in South Africa will invariably be associated with them.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the research reported herein identifies the majority of Zimbabweans in South Africa as economic migrants, and much like other populations of economic migrants, they play a significant role in contributing to the economic development and growth of South Africa. Their contributions take various forms, including paying taxes to SARS through PAYE taxes, owning both formal and informal businesses that employ South Africans and generating income, renting houses—which provides income to South African property owners—and engaging in all the economic transactions of everyday life. Additionally, their contributions extend to providing essential domestic services and taking care of South African families, thus playing a crucial role in raising the next generation of South Africans. While South Africa traditionally boasts one of the strongest economies in the Sub-Saharan region, it faces economic challenges, with average economic growth limited to around one per cent over the past decade (WCG 2023). Furthermore, the unemployment rate has reached its highest point in decades, standing at 32.6% in the second quarter of 2023 (Stats SA 2023).

In an attempt to revitalize the South African economy and job growth, President Ramaphosa has pushed for changes with ministers whose positions are regarded as anti-immigrant. South African economic policies need to protect its native labour market force while promoting economic growth and addressing structural unemployment. The ongoing xenophobia against immigrants in South Africa, particularly Zimbabweans, if left unaddressed, may drive these individuals to seek refuge in other nations where they feel safer. This potential exodus could lead to shortages in the labour force of both skilled and unskilled workers.

This research therefore recommends a set of actions. First, the South African government should reduce barriers for skilled Zimbabwean immigrants with job offers from South African employers. This would ensure that positions requiring skilled labour are promptly and adequately filled, promoting economic growth and productivity within the country. A new economic immigrant visa system, better than the ZEP program, needs to be developed and tailored to Zimbabwean immigrants in South Africa. It is essential to recognise that Zimbabweans in South Africa fall under various visa categories, including critical skills, ordinary skilled, and unskilled labour and contribute to the South African economy. Different visa systems with specific terms and conditions could be developed to accommodate these diverse labour force categories. For those deemed critical and desirable to the economy, permanent residency options may be

considered, similar to what is currently offered for critical skills and general work permit visas. For the low-skilled labour force, and those who work in the informal economy, an informal business visa could be issued. This would enable the lawful operation of informal businesses, with specific restrictions on their modes of operation and other regulations to ensure compliance with South African laws and regulations. The informal sector visa could also enable the unskilled to become documented and counted in census activities that survey South Africa and its economy. The Zimbabweans' economic presence and its substantial contributions to the South African economy through taxes and labour could then be more definitively recognised.

Building on the research findings herein, the authors advocate for a more inclusive society by dispelling misconceptions and promoting evidence-based policy-making. In the spirit of President Ramaphosa's Operation Vulindlela 2023 report, a society that embraces diversity and recognises the valuable contribution of immigrants will enable future South African progress and prosperity.

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