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CROSS BORDER MIGRATION AS A POVERTY ALLEVIATION STRATEGY; A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN IMMIGRANTS FROM ZIMBABWE TO SOUTH AFRICA AND MEXICO TO UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract

This paper maps out the strategy that both Zimbabweans and Mexicans use to migrate to their neighboring countries in order to alleviate poverty. Both South Africa and United States of America have witnessed an increase in a cross-border migration whereby illegal and legal migrants cross the border to find greener pastures in different parts of the countries. Limpopo shares the borders with Zimbabwe and in the United States; California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas share the borders with Mexico. The high flow of immigrants to South Africa from Zimbabwe and United States of America from Mexico is mainly caused by the economic hardships in their home countries. Most migrants are youth, both males and females, and adult males who left their families back home and came to South Africa and America to find work and be able to support their siblings and children back in Zimbabwe and in Mexico. This is a conceptual paper; therefore, the author identifies the gap and relies on what is already documented but not addressing the issues of migration and poverty. The study aims to show the similarities between the Mexican immigrants and Zimbabwean immigrants while looking at how poverty encourages international human mobility. Findings from the study demonstrate that poverty is a push factor to migration. A large number of people from poor countries migrate to countries with good economies and opportunities with the aim of being employed so they can support their families in their own countries and some even start businesses and investments.

Keywords: Migration, Border, Poverty, Economy, Remittance

1. Introduction

International human mobility has long been used as a way for households to seek work and better opportunities elsewhere, improve their livelihoods and raise their income as well as escape poverty and economic insecurity. The nature of Zimbabwean migration has changed over the years. Most Zimbabweans are young job seekers motivated by the humanitarian needs of their families back home in Zimbabwe. On the other hand, these migrants migrate alone and look for those employment opportunities to improve their socioeconomic status. Moreover, immigrants are motivated by the fact that they will be able to earn money in South Africa and send it home (Polzer, 2008).

Sithole and Dinbabo (2016) demonstrate that the process of population movement is generally viewed as a response to poverty, vulnerability to various risks, and poor access to basic needs, hence people move in search of greener pastures in different countries. Within Sub-Saharan Africa, cross-border migration is mainly a result of economic factors. For the reason that the aim of migrating is to support their families and to escape from poverty, Mexican immigrants are able to support their family members back at home. Moreover, they choose to leave their families behind and engage in circular migration. However, if opportunities at home are no longer sufficient to support their families, they may choose to resettle their families and stay longer in the United States. If opportunities in the United States improve, migrants may also be able to secure their targeted level of income quicker than otherwise expected, increasing the likelihood of returning home because they will be having money to support their families and relatives (Reyes, 2004).

Lazano and Lopez (2013) suggest that there is many female-headed households in Mexico who leaves their children at home in Mexico because of poverty and seek employment in the U.S. The immigrants stay in the United States for some time and make money, later on, they return home to visit their children when it is financially and logistically possible. The goal of the researcher in this study is to try to highlight that immigrants from Zimbabwe to South Africa and Mexico to United States of America use migration as a strategy to escape poverty and economic insecurity. Over and above that, they make sure that they look for opportunities to be able to work and send some remittances home.

The aim of this study was to assess how immigrants use migration as a poverty alleviation strategy, this is very important because the immigrants from Zimbabwe and Mexico are migrating to the neighboring countries with good economies to better their lives and that of their families back home. These are economic migrants who seek opportunities in their neighboring countries where there are job offers, even if it is cheap labor they will take it for the survival of their families back home.

Literature on the same topic seems to focus much on migration but not on the cause of migration or the push factors. There are a number of factors that contribute to high-level migration, especially from a poor economy to a good economy, and one of them is poverty.

2. Theoretical framework

This paper adopts a new economics theory of labor migration (NELM) and the rationale behind the theory is that it emphasizes the household as the relevant decision-making unit. The theory defines migration as a tool that households use to overcome market failures while sending a family member away from home to work. A household makes an investment that will be recovered if the migrant remits some income later. These remittances are very important when there are poorly functioning local markets for capital (Sindi and Kirimi, 2006). The household head makes migration decisions where necessary. According to Abreu (2010), the new economic labor migration rests on the hypothesis that potential migrants carry out interpersonal income comparisons with other people within their relevant social settings and that it is these comparisons, along with their wish to improve their relative positions within those settings, that constitute the relevant element in the decision-making process. Migrants cross the border with the aim of improving their lifestyles and that of their family members. The decision to migrate is taken by the whole family in order to increase financial security and reduce vulnerability and challenges related to market let-downs or unexpected risks (Sithole and Dinbabo, 2016).

Population mobility in the territory is caused by a number of reasons and among others is poverty; one can get the following overview of the migration phenomenon. Therefore, individual migration is determined primarily by economic factors, and this is regarded as the push factor for migrants (Porumbescu, 2012). On the other hand, remittances are regarded as one of the key to the positive function of population movement. The household that sends migrants or encourages their family members to cross border and look for opportunities are likely to see an increase in the household income if the migrants move to a country where the economy is good as compared to their own countries (Taylor *et al.* 2003).

The new economic labor migration has negative impacts on households who rely on the members of the household for production, especially those in the agricultural sector. Moreover, when members of a household migrate to the other country, it means that there will be less production in the household and this will in turn affect their income. There is a mixture of blessings in the sense that it is only good for migrants who cross border because they are running away from poverty and they want to better their lives, but it disadvantages those households who rely on all the members of the family for production. A labor reduction of this size will always have a large negative effect on income of the household (Taylor *et al.* 2003). As indicated in the discussion above that the NELM has its negative effect and that would imply that migration exacerbates labor shortages, while positive effects would indicate that migration complements productivity or household income by relaxing credit or risk constraints (Sindi and Kirimi, 2006).

This theory is very relevant because it asserts that in a normal household, the decision to migrate for the sake of survival and escape poverty must be taken not only by the individual but by the whole household because this affects the income of the household. It is of fundamental importance to also take into consideration that the migrants are crossing the border to improve their household income and that of their families. These economic migrants are only moving because of economic pressure, and they are forced to look for opportunities elsewhere.

3. The concept of cross border migration

Population movement from one country to another is not a new thing; it is something that has been there for decades. People cross the border for many reasons. The cross-border migration is a powerful force that shapes the distribution of human populations across the globe and it has an effect in the political, economic, social, and cultural structures of the communities. Cross border migration is a particular source of concern for some countries as it has significant growth and development implications for origin and destination countries either skilled or not skilled (Docquier, 2013).

The borders are also increasingly designed to regulate the pace of international mobility rather than to block population movement entirely because people are always moving. However, it is important that the movements are controlled, or slowdown in order to ensure that there is effective border control. In some other countries, migrant labor which moves outside the expedited channels of border crossing can wait for long periods of time before being granted admission (Axelsson, 2022), and that is mainly for controlling purpose and to account for the migrants.

Scholars like Mulugeta and Makonnen (2017) argue that the process of migration, status of migrants and place of destination, cross-border migration has multifaceted implications, which could be taken as both positive and negative outcomes of the demographic, cultural and socioeconomic circumstances of countries. The hosting state has the responsibility to improve the lives of migrants and advance welfare in countries of origin provided that appropriate public policies are put in place. This could only be possible if the migrants go through the proper channels of entering a country with legal documents, not fence jumpers. Those who come legally are accounted for by the states and the government is well aware of their availability in the country. There is nothing wrong with cross border migration; the only problem comes when migration, particularly cross-border migration, is carried out illegally. The illegal crossing of migrants is causing great adverse impacts on the migrants, sending households, migrant-origin countries and the hosting community. The most critical consequences of illegal cross-border migration, in the current global milieu, are related to threat to security and economic aspects. Some criminals operate through organized crimes in many destination countries and this is causing a nightmare to the law enforcement agencies of the host countries. Likewise, illegal migration may also cause an increased rate of unemployment, especially in economic stagnation period (Garson and Loizillon, 2013), the host country starts to experience a scramble for limited resources that the natives are supposed to be sharing.

Poverty has become both widespread and intense and the proportion of the population living in abject poverty is on the increase. Rural to urban migration intensified as farm laborers, deprived of the means to improve their living conditions, abandoned work and life in rural areas in search of wage labor in the cities. In recent years, macro-economic adjustment measures and

huge increases annually in the number of entrants into the labor market have fueled the job crisis (Adepoju, 2003).

According to the Department of Home Affairs in South Africa, the government can account for legal immigrants as well as those that enter South Africa legally but stay on illegally after their permits have expired. There are those immigrants who enter the country legally with the required documents but overstay, and by overstaying they become illegal. However, the government cannot account for individuals who enter the country illegally and stay illegally. It is difficult for any government to give the exact number of undocumented immigrants because they cross the border illegally (Wotela and Letsiri, 2015).

Illegal immigrants from Zimbabwe find it easy to enter South Africa mostly through the bushes. The Zimbabwe-South Africa border is one of most porous and fluid borderlands on the African continent. Its official entry point known, as the Beitbridge Border is the busiest road border post in Southern Africa, the border link South Africa with all other SADC countries. The illegal immigrants, cross-border traders, dealers or criminals also independently gain entry to and from South Africa, especially through 'smart entry' techniques. If they do not come through the bushes or river, they use fake, forged, stolen, expired or deceased ones' travel documents or passports. However, because of the high level of corruption at the borders, and the immigrants already know the techniques; what they normally do is that they slip some cash in-between the passport's pages to bribe the border authorities. As little as 100 Rand, it gives you an entry to South Africa. Some of them use the 'smart entry' through the buses and haulage truck drivers, many of whom have efficient and blossoming syndicates with customs and immigration officials at the Beitbridge Border Post. The drivers notify the authorities in advance of their illegal clients or passengers some of whom may be hiding under seats or containers in the buses or trucks whilst the border checks or scans occur (Daimon, 2010).

In the western world, the U.S.–Mexico border is experiencing an era of unparalleled trade and exchange. The Mexicans had been enjoying access to a large temporary worker program, legal permanent immigration was not restricted, and this contributes to a high volume of illegal crossing by Mexicans (Massey *et al.* 2014). Moreover, when legal flows of goods and people are at historical highs, so are illegal cross-border flows of undocumented migrants. The United States of America started to experience an increase in a number of illicit border crossing from Mexico immediately after the end of the Bracero Program in 1964. The illicit immigrants from Mexico to United States in 1997 was estimated to 3.1 million. As indicated earlier on, there are those who come legally and simply overstay their tourist visas, the majority of illegal Mexican immigrants residing in the United States cross the border without documents (Orrenius, 2001).

This strategy of illicit migration is both a social and an economic process. On economic aspect, the Mexican migrants choose to migrate to the U.S. for various motives, amongst others is to maximize earnings, to diversify sources of household income in the absence of insurance markets or government substitutes. This is an indication that as long as there is no balance as far as economy is concerned, the developed countries will always experience the issue of illicit migration because people are running away from poverty. It is not like people enjoy migration, they are forced to migrate. However, there are those who are not forced but volunteer to migrate because they want to improve their lifestyles (Massey *et al.* 2014).

4. The similarities between immigrants from Zimbabwe and Mexico

There are similarities between the immigrants from Zimbabwe to South Africa and from Mexico to United States of America. Both countries are experiencing a high unemployment rate, poor economic growth and they are forced to migrate to the neighboring countries for survival and avoid poverty. The immigrants accept low income and cheap labor. They use migration as a poverty alleviation strategy.

4.1. Economic migrants from Zimbabwe to South Africa

International human mobility in the Southern African region has a long and complex history. A number of factors causes it and amongst others is poverty, political tension and poor economy in

the home country of the migrants. Therefore, it is based on these reasons that people will always migrate but poverty becomes the number one on the list (Crush *et al.* 2018). When the migrants migrate to South Africa, especially the Zimbabweans, they are looking for opportunities not only to survive but also to sustain and support their loved ones at home. Majority of them are working as cheap laborers' either in farms or in private companies. Moreover, there was a high demand for laborers in South Africa during the late nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of contract workers from as far away as Zimbabwe were recruited to come and work in mines. Not only the Zimbabweans were recruited but the Malawians, Lesotho and Mozambique have been recruited also. South Africa remains a magnet to most of the countries in the Southern African development Region (SADC) and the continent at large (McDonald *et al.* 2000; Malatji, 2021).

Zimbabwe is seen as a major migrant sending country and in the 1990s the structural adjustment reforms had a serious impact on Zimbabwean migrants, unemployment started to grow and this left the Zimbabweans in a predicament situation, hence majority of them had to migrate. The situation is still similar even now in the year 2022 and it is even worse. Everyday there is a group that is crossing the border to South Africa because they are running away from poverty (Crush *et al.* 2018), and they want to support their own families back in Zimbabwe.

As highlighted in Crush and Tawodzera (2017), the Zimbabweans are of the view that South Africa is much better as compared to Zimbabwe, and there are job opportunities even if it is in an informal sector, they appreciate the little that they get from the employer so that they are able to support their families back home. Very few of the Zimbabweans are interested in working in the formal sector because they know that it is not that easy. The Zimbabweans can only work in the formal sector provided there is a shortage of skills, which is very rare in South Africa. There is high unemployment rate, and shortage of food with poor economy and this leads to mixed migration in Zimbabwe and some part of the SADC region, the only magnet is South Africa (Malatji, 2021). In the process of crossing the border, there will be those migrants who cross illegally and ask for asylum just so they can stay in South Africa because Zimbabwe is not really a refugee-producing country, so it is very clear that South Africa could not in any way accommodate them as refugees. Moreover, what the South African government did was to offer the Zimbabweans amnesty from 2010 up to date, and the two parties continue to engage each other on this agreement for the sake of renewal. If the South African government does not renew the asylum then it means double trouble for the Zimbabweans. They will be in the country illegally, and they will have no jobs, and this may lead to deportation. What this indicates is that many migrants are using the asylum-seeker process to legitimize their presence in South Africa and avoid deportation so that they can fulfil their dream of alleviating poverty in their households back in Zimbabwe (Crush and Tawodzera, 2017).

According to Muzondidya (2008), there is no much different between the earlier and the recent Zimbabwean migrants, all they need is opportunities to better their lives. Those who are lucky to be employed in either the informal sector or formal sector are able to send remittances back home. They do not prefer to be traveling home every month because it cost them a lot of money, what they normally do is to give their remittances to their fellow compatriots who are going back home so they can deliver to their houses. Nonetheless, some people take advantage of this and instead of taking the remittance to the household of the immigrant, they rather keep them to themselves. By sending remittances home is a good thing but it also comes with risks because they might not even rich your home (Dumba and Chirisa, 2010).

4.2. Escaping economic insecurity and poverty through human mobility

Both males and females migrants from Zimbabwe to South Africa they are being pushed by the economic hardships at their home country. Poverty and economic insecurity in Zimbabwe is on another level where by people have to risk their lives by crossing the borders by any means just to survive. It is not easy for a household to be living in less than 1 dollar a day. There is no hope and it seems as if no one cares, hence the majority of them prefer to migrate. Moreover, leaving their homes simply means that they are escaping poverty, even though they do not know what the future holds for them and what is going to happen to them when they get to South Africa, but

it is a risk they are prepared to take for the sake of their families and their survival (Mutambara and Maheshvari, 2019).

This view is also supported by Mulugeta and Makonnen (2017) that migrants are driven out of the country as a result of a lack of livelihood opportunities, negative attitudes attached with low paying informal jobs and poor working conditions with low pay. There is a serious influence on the income of the employee in their own country; if the income is low then the employees might flee the country. This is a clear indication that as long as there is no balance as far as the economies of countries are concerned, the global village will always experience cross-border immigration.

Besides, there are those immigrants who migrated because they want good opportunities and better jobs in South Africa, most of them find that they are working but are not satisfied with the remuneration and they cannot afford the basic needs for their families. What they get in South Africa is far much better than what they would otherwise get at home in Zimbabwe (Hungwe, 2020). Conversely, the majority of migrants especially the undocumented ones in South Africa work in construction industry, commercial farms and small businesses in the informal sectors. These are key areas of work for undocumented migrants mostly (Bloch, 2010).

4.3. Economic migrants from Mexico to United States of America

Poverty in Mexico continues to affect half of the country's population and the people are unable to afford their basic needs, which is the reason why they are feeling their country to the neighboring country (Alba, 2013). The Mexican immigrants are not different from the Zimbabweans; they both take cheap labor and low income, which the locals cannot accept. The reason why there is a high volume of immigrants from Mexico to United States of America is because of the Bracero Program; this was a bilateral guest worker program, which was initiated immediately after the end of the Second World War. The program offered government support to recruit workers from Mexico to US on a temporary visa. Moreover, the Mexicans still migrate to the US even in this century because they are attracted by the economy of the US and that is where opportunities are (Brick *et al.* 2011). This is also supported by Bloch (2010), who indicates that Migrants cross illegally into South Africa to meet the demand for cheap and seasonal non-contractual labor that undocumented migrants can offer in certain sectors of the economy, especially on farms in Northern Limpopo, so there is a demand and a supply that deportations are not quelling. It is because of cheap labor and exploitation that the immigrants experience in the host countries like South Africa and US, however, they are able to save some money, send remittances home, and support their families. For the immigrants this is very much better than staying at home where there are no opportunities. Somehow, the bracero programs encouraged illicit migration from Mexico to the US and the majority of the migrants were from the rural villages who depend on rain-fed farming. The immigrants were encouraged by the higher wages in the US and that is how they started to cross the borders. Immigrants found instead large and labor-intensive factories in the fields accustomed to paying relatively low wages to seasonal workers who were available when their services is needed. This was somehow exploitation but because of poverty, the immigrants are left with no choice but to take whatever the job that is presented to them. When you are hungry and beg, you do not choose the kind of job you are offered, you just work just so that you can be able to earn a living (Martin, 2003).

According to Alba (2013), the Mexicans who migrate to US because of poverty are now settling permanently in the US, they have become an increasing share of the US immigrant population, which overall has risen sharply over the past decades, and they are the largest group of migrants in the US.

5. The impact of remittances on development of families of migrants

The important objective of this study was to assess how immigrants use migration as a poverty alleviation strategy, this is very important because the immigrants from Zimbabwe and Mexico are migrating to the neighboring countries with good economy in order to better the lives of their families back home. They send remittances to their household to improve household income.

Scholars like Dube (2014) conclude that international migration and remittances have a strong and statistically significant impact on reducing poverty in the developing world. This is an indication that migrants migrate in order to escape poverty and develop their families back home through the remittances they send home. This is also supported by the findings of Mulugeta and Makonnen (2017), who mention that the culture of migration for supporting families has emerged in several areas in Ethiopia and some other parts of African continent. Poor family background and poverty are contributing factors to cross-border migration.

However, it is also argued that migration brings about positive benefits as it leads to financial inflows for poor households in different countries. There is a mixture of blessings with regard to migration because the origin country will blame migrants for leaving their countries, while the household members will grace the decision taken because it will improve their lives. Sending remittances home is important to the communities of the migrants. The findings by Dube (2014) are also supported by Cohen (2011), who indicates that remittances are important for the role they play in sending households that lack local opportunities at home.

With this, it will be important for scholars in the field of migration to conduct studies and investigate if ever remittances encourage population mobility from poor countries to developed countries. Moreover, most of the people who migrate end up better than before they moved, and their lives change. The gains are potentially highest for people who move from poor to the wealthiest countries (Dube, 2014). Remittances give people confidence and challenge the way in which individuals think, some of them start to think about better education, and improve their living conditions because of the remittances (Cohen, 2011).

While on the issue of remittances, there are different views and opinions about the contribution that is made by the immigrants in growing the economy of the host country. The majority of them when migrating if they do not find jobs, start their own businesses and employ their fellow compatriots so that they can send remits home, whatever that might be needed. Therefore, it is so important that studies are conducted to investigate exactly how remittances destroy the economy of the host country but develop the economy of the countries of the migrants. The contribution that is made by the migrants is very minimum as compared to what the remittances do to the households of the migrants. Moreover, they are able to send their children to good schools with the money made from host countries, and even start businesses in their own countries.

Fayissa and Nsiah (2010) also support this by claiming that there is a motive for remittances and that is to take advantage of investment opportunities when the economic condition in the home country is healthy. The remittances can be used to invest in businesses back home, and this means that money is being taken away from the host country to develop the countries of immigrants. In most of developing countries, remittances are mostly profit-driven and increase when economic conditions improve back home and private investments (Giuliano and RuizArranz, 2006). Banga and Sahu (2010) also share the same sentiments.

There are high chances that the remittances will reduce the level of poverty in the households of the immigrants in Zimbabwe and Mexico. They do not only reduce poverty, they also contribute to their development. The remittances from the immigrants can also indirectly promote community development through spillover mechanisms. This will increase the consumption of migrant households and generate multiplier effects. If recipient families increase their household consumption of local goods and services, this will benefit other members of the community through the increase in demand, which stimulates local production, thereby promoting job creation and local development. This is an indication that poverty in the household of immigrants is reduced and this will in turn assist the community members (Anyanwu and Erhijakpor, 2010).

6. Conclusion

The key aim of this study is to make a comparison between immigrants from Zimbabwe to South Africa and from Mexico to United States of America, using migration as a strategy to alleviate poverty. This study concludes that the issue of population mobility is something that could not be stopped, the world will always experience international human mobility because of several issues

like better jobs, high unemployment rate, wars, poor economy, and improved living standards. Most immigrants from Zimbabwe and Mexico migrate to the neighboring countries with the good economy like South Africa and United States of America in search of opportunities and escape poverty in their countries of origin. Furthermore, the immigrants are pushed out of the country because of poverty and are pulled into other countries because of the opportunities available in those countries. Immigrants are able to send some remittances home for the sake of the development of their countries and their household, however, the contribution that they make in the host country is so minimum. They are in those countries to work and invest money in the country of origin as soon as their economy is doing well.

This study recommends that as much as the immigrants migrate to countries with good economies, it is important that they should not only focus on sending remittances home but also contribute to the economic growth of the host countries. This will also help in terms of creating jobs for all those who live in those countries.

Cross-border migration is considered as a positive factor for the economic growth of both the country of origin and destination. Some migrants are motivated by their desire to succeed and create businesses, which in turn generate new jobs and vacancies. Therefore, it is recommended that the migrants who operate businesses in the host countries should employ the natives and their compatriots. The remittances should contribute towards the development of the country of origin.

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