

**Promoting African Solutions to African Crises: Prospects for Zimbabwe's Peace and Reconstruction**

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**The Ambiguities of Diaspora Politics: The Zimbabwe Diaspora and the Zimbabwe Crisis**

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**Abstract**

*The Zimbabwean diaspora is one of the less talked about issues in many of the debates about the 'Zimbabwe Crisis' or attendant efforts to resolve it. Yet, since the beginning of the crisis around 2000 large numbers of Zimbabweans have emigrated to Europe and North America as well as the relatively prosperous neighbouring countries of South Africa, Botswana and Namibia in search of better economic opportunities. Many of these Zimbabweans living and working outside their country have maintained strong ties with their home country through remittances to families and different forms of philanthropic giving. From their various locations outside Zimbabwe, the emerging communities of Zimbabwean diasporas made up of asylum seekers, political refugees, skilled expatriates, students, semi-skilled and unskilled labour migrants and undocumented/illegal migrants have remained constantly engaged in political, social and economic processes back home through their engagement with outsiders, networking and advocacy and publicity work outside. Others have played a crucial role in maintaining the political stalemate through their direct and indirect involvement in political and social activities designed either to uphold the government establishment or introduce change back home. Zimbabweans abroad have thus become very much embedded in the Zimbabwe crisis and all efforts designed to find a solution to the crisis cannot afford to exclude them.*

*This discussion, in the main, focuses on the role of the Zimbabwean diaspora in accentuating the Zimbabwe Crisis as well as their part in its penultimate resolution. It discusses the ways in which Zimbabweans abroad intersect with the political and social processes in Zimbabwe and how they engage from outside. The focus here is on the various forms of political struggle engaged in, at both the individual and group levels, by Zimbabweans in the diaspora in the broader context of the political conflict. Drawing on existing debates on the importance of diaspora communities in resolution of conflicts, the paper also discusses the limitations, challenges and opportunities for effective diaspora involvement in the resolution of the crisis.*

## **Introduction**

Since the beginning of the 'Zimbabwe Crisis' in 2000, a growing number of Zimbabweans have left their homeland bound for Western Europe, North America, and the economically prosperous neighbouring countries of South Africa and Botswana. The 2002 census estimated that 3 million people had emigrated from Zimbabwe, fleeing economic hardship or political persecution. Newspaper accounts have speculated that there may be over 2 million Zimbabweans living in South Africa (by far the most important site of Zimbabweans abroad), and about half a million Zimbabweans in the United Kingdom. Other Zimbabweans have made their way to destinations as far flung as New Zealand and Australia.

The large number of Zimbabweans spread all over continental Europe, the Americas and the southern African region has created what observers have described as an incipient Zimbabwean diaspora community. This emerging diaspora is made up of asylum seekers, political refugees, skilled expatriates, students, semi-skilled and unskilled labour migrants, undocumented/illegal migrants and others who have naturalised. In its various geographical locations, the heterogeneous group of Zimbabweans abroad has been constantly engaged not only in negotiating new spaces for themselves but also in political and economic processes at home.

This chapter discusses issues around the complex and sometimes ambiguous role of Zimbabwe's diasporas in Zimbabwe's ongoing crisis. The discussion, in the main, focuses on the ambiguous roles of the Zimbabwean diaspora in resolving and accentuating the Crisis. First, it discusses the ways in which Zimbabweans abroad intersect with the political and economic processes in Zimbabwe, focusing on the various forms of political and economic struggles engaged in, at both the individual and group levels, by Zimbabweans in the diaspora. Second, it discusses the limitations, challenges and opportunities for effective diaspora involvement in the resolution of the crisis. Drawing on existing debates on the importance of diaspora communities in resolution of conflicts and examples from comparative case studies from across the globe, such as the Irish, Sri Lankan and Nigerian diasporas, the discussion also explores the various ways Zimbabweans can contribute politically and economically to the penultimate resolution of the political conflict and transformation in Zimbabwe.

## **Contextual Background**

Virtually every nation contains not only a core of people living in the territory they think of as their homeland, but also others who have migrated, sometimes as refugees but often as emigrants, seeking better opportunities elsewhere. Diasporas can have a positive and a negative influence on events and processes at home. More positively, diasporas can give humanitarian assistance to victims of conflict and they also support post-war reconstruction efforts. Migrants often send financial contributions to relatives and friends they have left behind and alleviate the suffering of people living in crisis situations. In countries like Mexico, for instance, migrant

remittances have become the biggest source of foreign income, and public works that would be considered the province of government elsewhere may be financed by Mexican workers' remittances sent to their hometowns.<sup>1</sup> During the Asian economic crisis in 1997-99, when foreign direct investment (FDI) tumbled down, remittances actually increased and helped cushion the impact of the crisis. Closer to home in Ghana, which has a much longer history of postcolonial migration dating to the 1960s, remittances from migrants from different parts of the globe have become the biggest source of Foreign Direct Investment received by the country, much more than amounts received from western donor countries and multilateral institutions (Higazi 2005).

On the political front, countries in crisis produce refugees and exile populations that engage with their homeland in ways that have both positive and negative impacts on the conflict dynamics in their homelands. At times, these diaspora communities can be irresponsible long-distance nationalist or fundamentalists that perpetuate conflicts through economic and political support. In countries at war, diasporas can secure resources to fuel armed conflicts, and they can provide opaque institutional and network structures that enable the transfer of arms and money to fighting groups (Smith and Stares 2007). In the specific case of Africa, Diasporas have been implicated in supplying resources that perpetuate wars on the continent. The work of Koser (2003) and Bernal (2004 & 2006), for instance, has shown that Eritreans abroad have over the years played an important role in mobilising funds for both Eritrea's war of independence and the country's intrastate wars against Ethiopia

On the positive side, diaspora and exile groups, when living outside conflict zones, can be committed to non-violent conflict resolution and they can make powerful contributions to peace and reconciliation, reinforce local processes of democratization and post-conflict reconstruction in their countries of origin (Østergaard-Nielsen 2005). Somali and Liberian groups living outside of Africa, for instance, have been involved in peace and reconstruction initiatives for their home countries (African Diaspora Policy Centre 2006; Mahmoud 2006).

Generally, Diasporas are impacted by political conflicts in their countries of origin and get involved in the conflict directly or indirectly. Sometimes they support revolutionary or secessionist movements or, alternatively, they uphold established governments resisting such movements (Riggs 1998). Palestinians in the diaspora, for example, have largely supported the Palestinian nationalist movement, while Irish in the United States and other parts of the world have supported the Irish nationalist movement. Similarly the Jewish diaspora played a crucial part in the creation of the modern state of Israel, and has continued to play an important role in supporting the Israeli cause. In North America, the political activities of well-established groups such as the Jewish, the Greeks and the Armenians, have been recognized as a significant part of North American domestic and international politics. Throughout Europe transnational communities of immigrants, labour

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<sup>1</sup> [www.limitstogrowth.org/WEB-text/remittances.html](http://www.limitstogrowth.org/WEB-text/remittances.html).

migrants and refugees retain and develop an interest in, and political ties with, their country of origin (Riggs 1998).

In the case of Zimbabwe, Diasporas have historically played an important part in influencing both the political and economic course of the country. The South African black diaspora groups, for instance, were important in providing intellectual leadership to the early forms of African protest politics in colonial Zimbabwe (Ranger 1970). At the same time, a number of Zimbabweans who went to live and work outside their country during the colonial period were not only exposed to new ideas about politics and society but were able to use those ideas learnt from outside to engage and reform their societies. Many of those who went outside, especially to South Africa and America which had a more radical and developed black political consciousness than other southern African countries, came back more active politically and played a crucial role in the liberation of the country from colonial rule (Muzondidya 2005; Shamuyarira 1978). It was therefore no coincidence that a significant proportion of the leadership of the early African nationalist movement, which included Joshua Nkomo, James Chikerema, George Nyandoro, David Parirenyatwa, Stanley Culverwell, Charles Mzingeli, Leopold Takawira, Maurice Nyagumbo, Herbert Chitepo and Robert Mugabe, had spent a considerable part of its life outside the country.

Through the exiles, the later nationalist organisations, ZAPU and ZANU, also managed to set up structures and mobilise foreign support for the nationalist cause in Europe, the Americas and the Nordic countries. The exiles were largely responsible for raising funds for the liberation organisations. They also organised demonstrations against the Rhodesian government from their locations outside. When the Rhodesia Front government in 1964 banned both ZANU and ZAPU, they moved to Zambia where they began to rely increasingly on Zimbabweans in the diaspora as they organised themselves politically and militarily (Tungamirai 1995: 40-43). All this underlined the importance of the diaspora in the internal political dynamics of crisis zones, an issue which has been highlighted, but ignored, in the current crisis in Zimbabwe.

### **The Diaspora and the Economic Crisis**

The economic crisis, which has resulted from the political crisis in Zimbabwe, has worsened the economic vulnerability of many of the country's residents. The economic livelihoods of most Zimbabweans at home has increasingly come to depend on remittances and the provision of goods from those Zimbabweans based abroad who have maintained strong ties with their home country. A study carried out on the development potential of Zimbabweans living abroad by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2005 showed that at least 96% of Zimbabweans in the United Kingdom and South Africa maintain regular social contact with family members (Bloch 2005). Another survey carried out in Harare and Bulawayo in 2005 and 2006 showed that 50 per cent of urban households are surviving on migrant remittances for everyday consumables too exorbitant or in short supply at home

(Bracking and Sachikonye 2007:1), while research by both Blair Rutherford and Lincoln Addison (2007: 628) and France Maphosa (2004 & 2008) on Zimbabwean migrants working in South Africa noted that money, food items and other consumer products sent back to Zimbabwe are an important source of support for many families and communities. In 2008, Zimbabweans abroad were sending back about \$USD50 million a month.<sup>2</sup>

The remittances from the diaspora communities have thus a direct poverty mitigating effect in Zimbabwe and have helped to keep the country going. Apart from the remittances that are sent to families, there is also an amount that is sent as charitable donations towards community development, i.e. to build and rebuild schools, churches and hospital (Bloch, 2005, Maphosa, 2004). A large proportion of diaspora giving is practised informally and privately through personal and kinship ties as well as through direct gifts. Conscious of the numerous economic, health and educational challenges facing their communities, Zimbabweans abroad are giving various forms of help to relatives, friends and institutions. Some are donating books, computers and other research material to their old schools and universities on an ad hoc basis (Mushonga and Nyakudya, 2008; Muzondidya, 2008). Many of the struggling schools have found a life-line through the intervention of their former students now working abroad who have donated money to repair leaking roofs or helped the schools to source equipment or donations from international donors. Much of the assistance given to schools is mobilised either individually or collectively, through alumni associations which are increasingly playing an important role in the sustenance of many of Zimbabwe's schools. The money raised from alumni has not only been used to purchase textbooks and other school items, but also to supplement the earnings of the struggling teachers.<sup>3</sup>

Like the thousands of Nigerians, Kenyans, Ghanaians and other Africans, who left as refugees or to study and work abroad, and investing and helping their countries' development, Zimbabweans abroad are investing back home and alleviating the suffering of the people in the country by buying groceries and fuel for struggling families, schools, hospitals and charity organisations (Muzondidya & Chiroro 2008; Muzondidya 2008; Maphosa 2004 & 2008). Also involved in assisting struggling communities in Zimbabwe are Zimbabwean entrepreneurs based outside, such as Strive Masiyiwa, the prominent telecommunications businessman who now lives in South Africa, whose companies are involved in corporate philanthropy that focuses on community development. Through his mobile telephone company- Econet Wireless, which has branches in both Zimbabwe and South Africa, Masiyiwa has established a funding programme aimed at helping academically gifted Zimbabweans to pursue their high and tertiary studies at local secondary schools and universities. The programme gives educational grants to 100 students drawn proportionally from all the country's 10 provinces annually.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Mail and Guardian Online, 14 August 2008.

<sup>3</sup> [www.savetheconvent.org](http://www.savetheconvent.org); [www.mosadete.info.ms](http://www.mosadete.info.ms); Discussion with Richard, Johannesburg 28 August 2008.

<sup>4</sup> [www.econet.co.zw/inside.aspx?pid=24](http://www.econet.co.zw/inside.aspx?pid=24).

The health of most Zimbabweans at home and their animals has also increasingly come to depend on medicine provisions from those Zimbabweans based abroad.<sup>5</sup> Zimbabweans living outside are sending or taking along basic drugs, including the desperately needed HIV-AIDS drugs, to Zimbabwe to assist sick relatives and neighbours. Even those without neighbours or relatives abroad, especially patients in need of specialised or expensive treatment both inside and outside Zimbabwe, have also received help from diaspora Zimbabweans when public calls are made for donations to pay for their medical bills.<sup>6</sup>

In response to their country's complex socio-economic circumstances, Zimbabweans abroad are thus playing various roles to keep Zimbabwe from economic collapse by supplying the country with both foreign currency and essential household goods in short supply. However, the Zimbabwean Diaspora has also played a negative role in both the economy and society, and some commentators have accused Zimbabweans abroad of worsening the economic crisis through their economic activities. For instance, while money sent from Zimbabweans abroad has had beneficial effect on close kin, remittances have had, as Sarah Bracking (2003: 633-44) has correctly argued, negative effect on both urban and rural economies and households without relatives abroad. Foreign currency inputs from the Diaspora have, according to some Zimbabwean economists, fuelled inflation through their trading at parallel currency markets and also pushed the price of goods and services through their inflationary effects.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, foreign currency inputs from the Diaspora, at a time when the economy is not generating enough foreign currency and the formal, central banking system does not have enough reserves to back up the local currency, have led to the dollarisation of local economies. Locals who have lost confidence in the collapsed Zimbabwean dollar are now demanding payment for goods and services in foreign currency.<sup>8</sup> Those excluded from benefiting from foreign currency inputs have increasingly found it difficult to compete or cope. Many Zimbabweans are thus finding themselves priced out of local markets for food as stores and vendors demand payment in hard currencies in the form of the U.S. dollar, South African rand and Botswana pula.<sup>9</sup> Only those receiving money and goods from relatives abroad are not

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<sup>5</sup> Zimbabwe's healthcare delivery system has been hard-hit by the current economic crisis. Because of foreign currency shortages, the government has not been able to procure essential drugs and maintain health infrastructure. See Baldauf, S. 2008. Inside Zimbabwe's Healthcare Crisis. *The Christian Science Monitor*, 30 May 2008; People's Health Movement. 2008. Health in Zimbabwe: PHM Zimbabwe Position Paper June 2008. [www.phmovement.org/cms/en/node/607](http://www.phmovement.org/cms/en/node/607). *The Body*, 11 September 2007. [www.thebody.com/content/news/art42500.html](http://www.thebody.com/content/news/art42500.html) - 32k

<sup>6</sup> See Newzimbabwe.com, 24 May 2008; *The Herald*, 15 March 2008.

<sup>7</sup> T. Chisango, 'Inflation and the Diaspora', *The Herald*, 3 July 2008

<sup>8</sup> *Chronicle* (Bulawayo), 30 April 2008; *City Press* (SA), 27 April 2008.

<sup>9</sup> 'Many Zimbabweans Priced out of Markets for Basic Food', *Voice of America*, 4 September 2008.

as struggling as the rest to afford basics and this has led to deepening class distinctions among households.

By and large, since the crisis began the Zimbabwe Diaspora's speculative economic activities have contributed to asset price inflation. The prices of houses in the major urban centres of Harare, for instance, have skyrocketed in the last few years, mainly due to massive spending on property by Zimbabweans abroad. Property being one of the few secure assets in the volatile market of Zimbabwe, Zimbabweans abroad have been sending foreign currency to buy houses and business premises for both investment and speculative purposes.<sup>10</sup> Some, especially professionals and entrepreneurs, have used their money earned abroad to buy luxury cars- deepening the country's slide into a consumerist economy.

Until recently, the government has maintained tight controls over exchange rates in the formal banking sector. As a result, many Zimbabweans in the diaspora have been using unofficial channels to send their hard currency, depriving both the government and regulated money transfer agencies revenue from transfer taxes. Because the banks offer lower rates than those offered elsewhere, much of the money sent has been traded on the black market. Using their access to foreign currency from their bases abroad, some of these Zimbabweans buy goods in short supply for resale at exorbitant prices. Zimbabweans abroad are, in this respect, ambiguously drivers and beneficiaries of the economic crisis through their role in driving both inflation and the black market.<sup>11</sup>

The Diaspora's influence on contemporary events and processes in Zimbabwe has been felt not just in the economy but on the political front, too. And, as with the economy, its impact on politics has been ambiguous.

### **Zimbabwean Diaspora and Politics: Opportunities and Challenges**

There has been considerable diaspora political activism since the beginning of the crisis in 2000. Much of the Zimbabwean Diaspora's activism has found form in the numerous political pressure groups formed by the Diaspora to help the democratisation process at home through lobbying key policy actors and participants in the Zimbabwe body politic. The diaspora groups, most of them opposed to ZANU PF's continued rule, are mainly based in the UK, USA and South Africa.

From their various locations abroad, these diaspora organisations have articulated their grievances mainly through peaceful demonstrations. Coordinated by a group called Zimbabwe Vigil, Zimbabwean exiles in the UK have been staging weekly protests outside the Zimbabwe Embassy in London since 2002 to draw public

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<sup>10</sup> T. Chisango, 'Inflation and the Diaspora', *The Herald*, 3 July 2008; *Mail and Guardian Online*, 14 August 2008.

<sup>11</sup> S.T. Maimbodei, 'Digging Beneath the Surface of Zimbabwe's 'diaspora syndrome'', *The Herald*, 2 October 2008.

attention to human rights abuses and lack of democracy in Zimbabwe.<sup>12</sup> Groups like the Zimbabwe Exiles Forum have also been mobilising Zimbabweans in South Africa to protest and demonstrate against perceived abuses of power by the ZANU PF government, while the Zimbabwe Action Support Group has also tried to rally Zimbabweans in the USA to be more active in resolving Zimbabwe's political problems. Many of the demonstrations have been directed at US-based Zimbabwean government officials and the relevant US officials so that they increase their pressure against the Zimbabwe government. Since the beginning of the Thabo Mbeki-mediated talks between ZANU PF and MDC for a negotiated political settlement in Zimbabwe in 2007, which Zimbabwe's civil society groups have dismissed as elitist and sidelining the 'people', these demonstrations and protests have been directed against the South African government, SADC and the leadership of both MDC and ZANU PF.<sup>13</sup>

Basically rooted in constitutional forms of protest, diaspora activism has also taken the form of court battles. The UK-based Diaspora Vote Action Group, for instance, unsuccessfully fought for the right of Zimbabweans abroad to vote in the 2005 and 2008 elections. In a petition brought before the Supreme Court shortly before the 2005 election, the group argued against a government decision that limited voting by Zimbabweans outside the country to members of the armed forces and embassy officials.<sup>14</sup> Despite its dismissal by the Supreme Court, the case generated a lot of international and local interest. In addition, a positive court ruling upholding the right of the diaspora to vote could have marked an important constitutional victory with the potential to tilt the political balance against the government.

At the individual level, Zimbabweans abroad have also played important roles in political processes in Zimbabwe. Their most important roles have been on fund-raising and mobilization of human and ideological support. Raising funds for political parties from local sources has been a huge challenge in the deteriorating economic climate of Zimbabwe, and both the MDC and ZANU PF have had to rely heavily for Zimbabweans outside for direct funding and to access donors from outside. Although there is a fair degree of secrecy regarding the Diaspora's financial support for political parties back home, mainly due to individual concerns about reprisals that might arise from exposure, there is some evidence Zimbabweans abroad are playing an important role in the financial sustenance of political parties in Zimbabwe. During the March 2008 elections, a number of Zimbabwean businessmen now living abroad reportedly funded the campaign of Simba Makoni,

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<sup>12</sup> Zimbabwe Vigil Coalition. Vigil Background. [www.zimvigil.co.uk/vigilbackground.htm](http://www.zimvigil.co.uk/vigilbackground.htm).

<sup>13</sup> 'Government and Opposition Leave Civil Society Out of Talks', IRIN, 21 June 2007; 'Civil Rights Groups Wary Over Mbeki-Led Talks', *The Nation (Nairobi)*, 15 July 2008; 'Civil Society Demands More From Talks', *Inter Press Service*, 16 August 2008. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200808170067.html>.

<sup>14</sup> 'Zimbabwe exiles petition Supreme Court over vote' *Newzimbabwe.com*, 1 February 2005.



the independent presidential candidate who broke away from ZANU PF after failing to get the party's support to be the presidential candidate.<sup>15</sup>

Economically restricted from doing business and fundraising in Europe by the current European Union and American sanctions, ZANU PF has also increasingly been relying on its supporters and sympathizers outside to raise funds and do party business outside. Recent media reports have suggested that Zimbabwean businessmen, both local and abroad, who are not on the 'personal sanctions' list have been engaged in sanction-busting for ZANU PF.<sup>16</sup> In the same vein, the MDC, also restricted by the Political Parties Finances Act from receiving funds from sources outside Zimbabwe, has been relying on Zimbabweans outside for both direct funding and to move illicit funds received from foreign donors.<sup>17</sup>

Being outside has made it possible for Zimbabweans to effectively network and build alliances with international organisations and other influential groups, and Zimbabweans abroad have used these networks to advance their parties' political causes in the ideological battle for the hearts and minds of the world. This battle has been fought in the numerous public forums and debates where the Zimbabwe issue has been discussed since 2000. Living in the diaspora has made it relatively easy for diaspora activists to reach the relevant decision-makers across the world and this has helped to promote international advocacy around the Zimbabwe crisis. Lobbying has been done through e-mail, websites, and direct appeals to the relevant political structures both inside and outside of Zimbabwe. Others have had face-to-face discussions with such bodies as the Congressional Black Caucus, senior officials in the European and US state departments and coalitions of civic groups (Makumbe 2005).

In the same way, diaspora groups and individuals based in South Africa have over the years lobbied the South African government, a powerhouse in regional and continental politics, to take more positive action on Zimbabwe. Much of this lobbying has been done either directly with the government officials or through the medium of South African civics, particularly labour and the church groups. Such advocacy activities have led to greater understanding of the Zimbabwe crisis regionally and internationally.

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<sup>15</sup> See 'Trevor Ncube Suspected of Funding Makoni' *The Herald*, 14 March 2008; 'British, SA firms 'fund' Makoni', [http://www.news24.com/News24/Africa/Zimbabwe/0,,2-11-1662\\_2281699,00.html](http://www.news24.com/News24/Africa/Zimbabwe/0,,2-11-1662_2281699,00.html). See also 'Business under fire for supporting Makoni', *Africa Report*, No. 160, 14-Mar-08, [http://www.iwpr.net/?p=acr&s=f&o=343394&apc\\_state=henpacr](http://www.iwpr.net/?p=acr&s=f&o=343394&apc_state=henpacr); 'A list of Simba Makoni endorsements to date', [www.talkzimbabwe.com/pdf.php?a=1798](http://www.talkzimbabwe.com/pdf.php?a=1798).

<sup>16</sup> *newzimbabwe.com*, 24 May 2008; *Zimbabwe Independent*, 29 October 2004; 'Tycoon flees Zimbabwe after falling foul of Mugabe', *The Guardian* (UK), 9 June 2006.

<sup>17</sup> 'Mugabe intensifies crackdown with MDC siege', *Cape Times* (SA), 12 November 2001.

Within Zimbabwe, Zimbabweans in the Diaspora have played a crucial role in pushing the frontiers of the political debates about national questions through their regular contributions in the press (both local and international). Debate inside Zimbabwe has been constrained through legislation, such as Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and Access to Information and Protection of Personal Privacy Act (AIPPA), which has also been used to control information outflow. Zimbabweans abroad, unlike those in Zimbabwe, have not been confronted with the same kind of restrictions and they have had more access to communication networks, especially the Internet; resulting in more information inflow about events at home. The rights to freedom of association and organisation enjoyed outside Zimbabwe have been critical to the promotion of vibrant political debate and activity among Zimbabweans abroad. Being away from the frontline has opened up more space to organize meetings and conferences and to engage in robust political debate.

Through the internet, whose use among Zimbabweans has been growing steadily over the last couple of years, Zimbabweans abroad have not only been able to link up with friends and relatives back home (Britain Zimbabwe Society 2003) but also to mobilise support for their respective political parties and debate national issues extensively. Those outside have found it easy to read Zimbabwean and other newspapers every day; to listen to radio broadcasts; to participate in chat shows; and to receive regular email attachments from human rights organisations and political parties. The numerous internet web sites operated by Zimbabweans abroad have led to the growth of what Bernal (2006) describes as Internet Intellectuals. It has also allowed for many Zimbabweans to voice their views. Internet based activism has thus opened a new front in democratic politics in Zimbabwe, especially among Zimbabweans abroad whose distance from the scene of political battles reduces other forms of political engagement.

Cyber democracy indeed offers democracy to a minority and restricts the major political debates to those with access to computers and the Internet. But, the recorded increased use of the Internet and wireless phones among Zimbabweans at home and abroad means that cyber democracy is a growing political front.<sup>18</sup> While it is difficult to quantify the effect of these sites or the extent to which they have fostered political networks and promoted activism, it is clear that it is a front which has enabled ideas to be discussed and linkages to be forged between individuals and political movements at home. Many of the important national questions of the day, including electoral politics and the coalition government between ZANU PF, MDC-Tsvangirai and MDC-Mutambara, have been widely debated by the Diaspora in cyberspace. The divisions and the leadership crisis within the dominant political parties, ZANU PF and MDC, have equally received a lot of debate on the Internet, and there is not doubt that these debates have, to a certain extent, shaped many people's thinking around these issues. The fact that the political leadership of parties and government have on many occasions been forced to react to news material or

<sup>18</sup> According to Internet World Stats, internet usage in Zimbabwe grew by 165% between 2005 and 2008. Ranking 10<sup>th</sup> in Africa, in terms of numbers of users of internet, Zimbabwe had 13521 000 internet users- a growth of 2 602% from 50 000 in 2000. See Internet World Stats, 2008. [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com).

web content published on web sites run by Zimbabweans outside shows that it is a front which Zimbabwean politicians have been forced to engage.

Zimbabwean journalists abroad have also played a very influential role in shaping the debates and processes at home. The exodus of Zimbabwean journalists, alongside their skilled counterparts, has led to the emergence of a Zimbabwe media-in-exile that strives to keep news flowing about their homeland (Witchel 2005). The numerous Zimbabwe diaspora newspapers include *The Zimbabwean*, an online and print weekly newspaper; *ZW news* and *Zimonline*, both produced out of South Africa; *Zimbabwe Situation*, bringing together news items about Zimbabwe from different online sources; and *NewZimbabwe.com*, featuring tabloid-style news (Witchel 2005). This media-in-exile also includes: SW radio Africa, a radio service station run by ex-employees of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and broadcast from London; Studio Seven, a radio service on the U.S.-government funded Voice of America in Washington that is staffed mainly by exiled Zimbabwean journalists, which both have an outreach in Zimbabwe. Internet radio stations such as Afro-sounds FM and SW Africa have also been important sites for promoting political debate around the Zimbabwe crisis.

Clearly, Zimbabweans abroad have increasingly played important roles in the political processes at home. The diaspora setting has equally opened up both opportunities for Zimbabweans abroad to play a more constructive role in the resolution of the crisis in their country. Yet, as highlighted in other literature on diaspora politics, there is both a dark and bright side to Zimbabwean diaspora politics.

To begin with, the material benefits diaspora activism sometimes offers have led to the growth of career activism among Zimbabweans abroad which has had a corrupting effect on their politics. Career politics among Zimbabweans in the diaspora has manifested itself in the form of briefcase organisations formed by opportunists purporting to be fighting for democracy when they are in fact greed individuals seeking to live off donor funds. Many of these organisations have no proper records of membership, organisational standards or proper accounting procedures for funds and other resources donated by well-wishers. The MDC branch in the United States of America, for example, was at some point criticised by the main body in Harare for failing to account for donated funds. The head of the branch was also accused of hand picking his team and engaging in other malpractices, which had cost the MDC in the USA, "much needed support, goodwill and respect".<sup>19</sup> The Zimbabwe Action Support Group was similarly accused of faking rallies and holding 'ghost meetings' in a bid to fraudulently solicit money from donors.<sup>20</sup> Many other

<sup>19</sup> 'MDC USA Branch Comes Under Fire', *Zimdaily*, 7 July 2005.  
<http://zimdaily.com/news2/article.php?story=20050707103938844>.

<sup>20</sup> 'Zimbabwe Action Support Group Accused of Faking Rallies', *SW Radio Africa Zimbabwe News*, 1 March 2006.  
[http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/mar2\\_2006.html](http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/mar2_2006.html).

Zimbabweans in the diaspora have made falsified political claims, with some claiming to be political asylum seekers, in order to regularise their stay in foreign countries or to get material help from service-focused human rights organisations.<sup>21</sup>

Career activism among Zimbabweans abroad has literally turned the Zimbabwe Crisis into a cash cow among both Zimbabweans abroad and NGOs working on democracy. Some Zimbabweans have come to depend so much on donor-funded projects on democracy and human rights that their careers and livelihoods depend on the continuation of the crisis. For such individuals, the short-term gains provided by the lack of a solution are more important than finding a long-term solution to the problem.

That the 'Zimbabwe crisis' has become lucrative business is evident from the proliferation of diaspora groups organising within the same diaspora community and working on the same issues. In South Africa alone there are about 20 diaspora civic organisations, most of them based in Johannesburg and competing for the same donors and political space. The plethora of groups operating in Johannesburg alone include the following: Zimbabwe Action Support Group (ZASG); Zimbabwe Advocacy Campaign (ZAC); Zimbabwe Exiles Forum (ZEF); Zimbabwe Diaspora Forum; Mthwakazi Forum; Mthwakazi Arts and Culture; Zimbabwe Human Rights Lobby Group; Zimbabwe Liaison Office (ZLO); Zimbabwe Solidarity Forum; Zimbabwe Political Victims Association (ZIPOVA); Zimbabwe Torture Victims Project; Zimbabwe Combined Civil Society; Peace and Democracy Project; Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition; Institute for Democracy in Zimbabwe (IDAZ); Heal Zimbabwe Trust (HZZT); National Constitutional Assembly (NCA, SA); Disabled Zimbabweans Abroad; and Concerned Zimbabweans Abroad. The groups and their leaders rival each other bitterly and the same individuals are often involved in more than one organisation (Maclean 2008: 12).

The general ambivalence of some donors toward the funding of Zimbabwe diaspora organisations is partly attributed to the rampant existence of such malpractice. The lack of seriousness of purpose in some organisations and the lack of integrity in the leadership of these groups has turned away potential activists and this has affected diaspora activism in general (Makunike 2005).

Further, the broad foundations and principles underlying these organisations and their choice of allies has seen some of them getting into partnerships with, or receiving funding from, conservative and reactionary groups. Organisations such as the Zimbabwe Vigil, for instance, have been criticised for being dominated by 'Rhodies' now living in the UK; while in South Africa, organisations like Flame Lily have also been the rallying point for conservative white Zimbabweans in South Africa.

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<sup>21</sup> *Mail and Guardian*, 24 July 2007

At the same time, Zimbabwe's diaspora groups' choice of political partners abroad has not only helped to further internationalise the Zimbabwe crisis but also to complicate its resolution. Some of the groups that have funded political activities in Zimbabwe have tied conditions to their support, and it is these conditions that sometimes dictate the position and stance of civil society groups on certain political questions (Gowans 2008). Even some of the material support that has been received by both ZANU PF and MDC from abroad has not come cheap. Unascertained newspaper reports have suggested that both parties, in their moments of desperation, have received conditional aid from foreign individuals, organisations and companies (often facilitated by the party's supporters abroad). In both cases, the parties have reportedly made concessions, which have tied their hands when it comes to negotiating the country out of its current crisis because they will have to repudiate some of these concessions in the process.<sup>22</sup>

Besides making bad choices when it comes to political allies, Zimbabweans abroad and their organisations have at times adopted bad political strategies which have had the effect of accentuating both the crisis and political tensions at home. Diaspora groups have generally adopted a very negative attitude towards political dialogue, and have tended to choose confrontation over constructive engagement. Like most civics, they have a tendency to resort to street theatre politics even where engagement is the most preferable tactic and this has alienated them from both the Zimbabwe government and regional bodies like SADC and the AU which shun street theatre politics. The diaspora organisations' confrontational politics, and their symbiotic relationship with the MDC has also proved problematic, as their cause has been confused with the MDC cause. A significant number of leaders of the diaspora civic organizations are either active or former members of the opposition MDC. The close symbiotic relationship with the MDC has not only meant that their cause has been confused with the MDC cause but has also given the government the perfect excuse to treat them with hostility.

Another major problem with Zimbabwean diaspora politics is its espousal of fundamentalist politics and adoption of counterproductive strategies. Removed from the day-to-day struggles at home, Zimbabweans in the diaspora have sometimes expressed views that are out of touch with the political realities in Zimbabwe. The strongest opposition to a negotiated political settlement, for instance, has been from Zimbabwean civics and Zimbabweans abroad. Some of the Zimbabweans now living abroad, especially political refugees who fled from political persecution by ZANU PF activists and government security agencies, have bitter memories of their experiences in Zimbabwe. Some have also experienced extreme hardship in exile.

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<sup>22</sup> 'On becoming a Chinese Colony', *Sokwanele/Zvakwana*, 21 June 2005.

[http://www.sokwanele.com/articles/sokwanele/onbecomingachinesecolony\\_21june2005.html](http://www.sokwanele.com/articles/sokwanele/onbecomingachinesecolony_21june2005.html); MDC agriculture and lands position paper avoids the tough issues. *Zimbabwe Review*, 10 August 2008.

<http://zimreview.wordpress.com/2008/08/10/mdc-agriculture-and-lands-position-paper-avoids-the-tough-issues/>; 'West tries to unite Zanu-PF rebels to bring down Mugabe from within', *The Guardian* (UK), 26 March 2007; 'Mugabe battles Mujuru faction', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 28 September 2007.

Influenced by their bitterness, these Zimbabweans have rejected political compromises to resolve the crisis. They have instead called for the political overthrow of ZANU PF, evidently unrealistic under the current circumstances where the balance of power between the ruling party and opposition forces is even. Groups such as the Zimbabwe Exiles Forum and the ZASG, for example, have called for the forceful removal of the government, while others have called for the closure of Zimbabwean embassies abroad.<sup>23</sup> These fundamentalist positions have compounded the problems in Zimbabwe in the sense that they have strengthened the hand of the radicals in both ZANU PF and the opposition who are opposed to a negotiated political settlement while putting pressure on moderates prepared to make political compromises.

Also compounding the problems of the national crisis in Zimbabwe is the political bickering and lack of unity among Zimbabweans abroad. While the diaspora has sometimes presented opportunities for greater unity among Zimbabweans, it has also reinforced disunities from home, based on regionalism and tribalism, among Zimbabweans abroad (Pašura 2005; Muzondidya, forthcoming). Ethnic and regional divisions from home have been deepened in some diasporic contexts. Much of the socialization among black Zimbabweans sometimes occurs within limited circles of people who know each other from home or organise in linguistic, ethnic and regional groupings. In one of the informal settlements in Pretoria, Zandspruit, Karanga-speaking migrants from Masvingo normally socialise alone, as do the Shangaan-speakers from Chiredzi and Chipinge, and Venda-speakers from Beitbridge. The various groups rent accommodation in different quarters of the informal settlement, rarely mix when drinking at shebeens and often engage in ethnic fights.<sup>24</sup> There is also mutual antagonism between Ndebele migrants who fled Zimbabwe during the *Gukurahundi* violence and killings of the 1980s who are often collectively branded ZIPRA dissidents, and Shona migrants who are often collectively identified with ZANU PF by the other group. In the Johannesburg branch of the MDC, the tension and hostility within the diaspora erupted into violence in 2005, resulting in two rival groups - MDC South Africa and MDC Zimbabwe Action Support Group, both of which competed to be recognised as the legitimate representative of the party in South Africa.<sup>25</sup>

Divisions among Zimbabweans abroad have given rise to tribally exclusive organisations. For instance, diaspora political activists from Matebeleland who are bitter about the marginalisation of their region from national development and the perceived ethnic hegemony of the majority Shona ethnic group have formed separatist organisations, such as *Mthwakazi Action Group on Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in Matebeleland and Midlands* and *Mthwakazi People's Congress (MPC)*. These organisations have not only provincialised Ndebele identity and tried to construct it

<sup>23</sup> 'Make the country ungovernable - ZASG', *The Zimbabwean*, 17 Feb 2006; 'Activists Demand Embassy Closure', *The Zimbabwean*, 2 March 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Interviews, Ruth, Philip and Manuel, Pretoria, 17, 18 & August 2007

<sup>25</sup> 'Man dead in MDC tribal clashes in South Africa', *Newzimbabwe.com* 15 June 2005; *Inter Press Service*, 24 November 2005.

as an antithesis to Shona identity, but have also agitated Ndebele self-determination through the creation of an autonomous Ndebele state (Mthwakazi 2006). Tribally based political parties within Zimbabwe such as the Patriotic Union of Matabeleland (PUMA), the Federal Democratic Union (FDU), ZAPU-Federal Party (ZAPU-FP), have all found more support among the young Ndebele generations in the diaspora, where displaced Ndebele communities are linking up via the internet, through web-based forums such as inkundla.net, to promote a distinct Ndebele political identity (Muzondidya and Gatsheni-Ndlovu 2007).

The racial divide between white and black Zimbabweans experienced at home, has also been reproduced in the diaspora. This divide, is particularly felt between the 'Rhodies' who could not accommodate themselves to majority rule, and black Zimbabweans, whom they blame collectively for their dislocation. As Chido Makunike, a Zimbabwean journalist, summed up this dilemma when writing about his observations about black and white Zimbabweans in the diaspora:

I am also struck by how there is a sharp, fairly definable contrast between the general expressions of black and white Zimbabweans at what is going on in their homeland. The anguish at the destruction of a beloved country is shared, but I seem to perceive in the websites and articles of some white Zimbabweans a surprising pining for the era of privilege, over and above the lamenting of what Zimbabwe has been reduced to by Mugabe (Makunike 2005).

Competing divisions of race, class, ethnicity, language and regionalism in the diaspora have thus often made the task of bringing all the disparate groups to a common programme of action that can pull the country out of its present quagmire much more difficult.

## **Conclusion**

The growing role of Diasporas in national and international development as well as politics can no longer be underestimated. Countries wishing to register success cannot afford to sideline the country's diaspora from their programme of activities, including politics. For many African countries, such as Ghana, Nigeria and Eritrea, their Diasporas have not only become major sources of foreign direct investment and commercial contacts but also important constituencies for political networking and advocacy. Through its economic transfers, engagement with Zimbabweans back home and outsiders, networking and advocacy, the Zimbabwean diaspora has also been actively involved in events and processes back home.

However, the role of Zimbabweans abroad in the resolution of the political and economic crises in their country has been an ambiguous one. At one level, these Zimbabweans have played a positive role, especially in the economy where they have injected the much-needed foreign currency, through their cash remittances, which has helped the country to avoid economic collapse. Some Zimbabwean diaspora organisations have also contributed humanitarian assistance to struggling

families and communities in Zimbabwe. On the political front, some of these organisations have helped the democratisation process through their advocacy and networking with influential organisations and governments abroad. Individual Zimbabweans abroad have also pushed the levels of engagement and debate on the main national questions, especially through their web postings and regular contributions to the national media, and this has helped Zimbabweans, including political elites, to reconstruct their ideas about national priorities and how to achieve them. At another level, the diaspora has been responsible for accentuating the crisis. For some, the crisis in Zimbabwe has presented the opportunity for short-term gains and this has prompted them to engage in political and economic activities which have worsened the political and economic conditions at home. The dark side of Zimbabwean diaspora behaviour has involved, in the main, fundraising and its networking activities which has sometimes involved reactionary groups. This has not only further internationalised the crisis but also complicated its resolution since some of these reactionary groups have tried to impose their reactionary agendas in political engagement processes through the organisations and individuals they fund.

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