



**ABI**

Arnold-  
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Institut

*“Our borders are many and don’t require any  
documents, just your money”*

**Undocumented Zimbabwean migrants in  
Botswana and South Africa under  
COVID-19**

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## **PROJECT SUMMARY**

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic migrant communities have become immobile—stuck in the destination countries, or unable to continue their journeys in transit or in origin countries. This project brings together a collection of essays that seek to spell out how migrant communities in the Global South, namely in Mexico, Nepal, Qatar and Zimbabwe, have been affected by, and reacted to the pandemic. Inspired by a mobility justice approach, we speak to the (changing) power relations inherent to mobility, as well as the intersectional nature of migration with inequalities mapped along a global geography of race and class, amongst others. We do this by acknowledging that long before COVID-19, migration and mobility were intrinsically embedded into a hierarchical globalized regime of asymmetric power, that largely determines who can move and under what conditions. The essays aim to not only re-centre the Global South, but also to view these cases as relational to each other and to the state of global affairs.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

For years, migrants from Zimbabwe have been undergoing xenophobic policies and discourses in South Africa and Botswana. This article demonstrates how the South African government has utilized the pandemic to further feed into these policies and discourses. From official statements to social media campaigns, the pandemic has been used as an opportunity for South Africa first discourse to grow and “coronationalism” to emerge, while depicting migrant communities, especially from Zimbabwe, as a risk to the public health. Based on ten interviews, the author shows how migrants have developed counterstrategies to cope with (new) border restrictions. While local lockdowns meant more immobility and risk of deportation for undocumented migrants, border restrictions have ironically increased the irregular crossings as the smugglers and migrants themselves developed an informal border regime in parallel to the formal one. Finally, the article reflects on the nature of different borders in the region, and how one-sided physical bordering approach is problematic and is likely to be dysfunctional.

*“You can’t just come with your fraudulent documents. The person who wants to enter your country with a fraudulent document is undermining your sovereignty, is undermining the order in your country, is undermining all the laws”*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new and unprecedented challenges since 2020 by negatively infiltrating all dimensions of human life at different levels, universally. This article considers how the multi-dimensional effects of COVID-19 have affected (im)mobility for undocumented Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa and Botswana. COVID-19 has amplified the plight of vulnerable populations, and for undocumented Zimbabwean migrants, their plight is aggravated by their precarious legal status in South Africa and Botswana. In turn, they devise creative strategies through their own agency, i.e. the capacity of migrants to make their own decisions, by working counter to enacted state policies.

Nonetheless, their outlook is even grimmer given the domestic economic situation of Zimbabwe, which has witnessed sustained economic and political turmoil, especially in the last two decades. In this paper, I discuss state responses by South Africa and a few selected responses by undocumented Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa and Botswana during the COVID-19 lockdown period in 2020. Although the responses, particularly by neighbouring South Africa and Botswana, are presented as measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, it appears that the current pandemic and subsequent lockdowns are being used as convenient justifications by states to push forward their long desired agendas of curbing the mobility of Zimbabweans into South Africa and Botswana.

Despite the recent demonstrations of governmental authority by the state – through the introduction of military helicopters and dinghies in the Limpopo River for example – actions by undocumented migrants and human smugglers have shown that sovereignty, which is the state of possessing supreme power and authority, does not lie solely in the hands of the state. Rather, this power also extends beyond the state to include other equally influential players, such as transporters and human smugglers from Zimbabwe, South Africa and Botswana. These players work in

parallel to government structures and devise parallel rules, by drawing alternative borders and immigration rules that facilitate clandestine migration in spite of the recurrent COVID-19 lockdowns. I illustrate this argument by examining counterstrategies that Zimbabwean undocumented migrants have resorted to during the lockdowns in order to facilitate and sustain their mobility into neighbouring countries for their livelihoods. Arguably, the fact that undocumented Zimbabweans have managed to remain mobile and to travel between Zimbabwe and South Africa or Botswana grants merit to the argument that state governance of immigration is weakened by strong non-state actors.

Examples of these actors include, but are not limited to, long-distance transporters and even government officials, who may also act in opposition to the regulations they are meant to enforce and uphold. Parallel governance actors are therefore effective in circumventing formal rules and regulations, thereby sustaining clandestine migration and rendering lockdowns ineffective in stopping mobility. Although lockdowns are a recent phenomenon designed to curb the spread of the coronavirus, for Zimbabwean migrants, specifically those without legal status, the circumvention of border controls and regulations is nothing new, for it has long been a survival skill – well before the advent of COVID-19. Rather, for most undocumented migrants, this has always been part and parcel of their creative survival skills and hence part of their daily lives.

For that reason, this paper argues that because the migrants in question have always existed under precarious conditions, even before COVID-19, under the pandemic, it has merely become a matter of adding a new kind of precarity to the long existing precarity of vulnerable migrants from Zimbabwe. Thus, COVID-19 has amplified the existing precarity of undocumented migrants not only from Zimbabwe but globally, as the following section will illustrate. The data from undocumented migrants suggests that mobility has not been deterred by lockdowns and that the use of alternative means to cross borders has not ceased but intensified.

## **II. PRECARIETY OF ZIMBABWEAN UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS**

For at least the past two decades, Zimbabwe has existed under tremendous economic and political strain in what has commonly come to be labelled as the “Zimbabwean problem” in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. Although the crisis began in the mid-to-late 1990s, it worsened in 2000 following the implementation of the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme, which saw many White commercial farmers displaced from their farms under a land redistribution programme implemented under the leadership of the late Robert Mugabe. Furthermore, the election of 2000 was hotly contested between the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front and the newly formed opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change. From that time to the present, elections in Zimbabwe have been marred by allegations of electoral fraud and violence (Takaindisa 2021).

On the economic side, the economy has been on a sustained downhill trajectory for over two decades now. Consequently, this has led to a mass exodus of both skilled and unskilled Zimbabwean migrants into neighbouring countries, especially to South Africa and Botswana. It has been argued that Zimbabwe has emerged as one of the leading sources of forced migration in the post-2000 era (Chikanda 2019). For the unskilled migrants, however, migration to South Africa and Botswana has never been easy due to restrictive immigration policies, which make it difficult to move freely.

As a result of the harsh mobility regime that confronts Zimbabweans, it comes as no surprise that many migrants living in South Africa and Botswana are undocumented. They have always led precarious lives under precarious labour conditions in the receiving countries (Campbell 2006; Bloch 2008). With the arrival of the COVID-19 outbreak, their precarity was intensified by the introduction of lockdowns in March 2020. Not only did COVID-19 lead to increased mobility at the borders as suggested by the IOM mobility report (IOM 2020), but on the other hand, it also made it more difficult for migrants to move and manoeuvre in the host countries, increasing immobility within them.

In essence, the pandemic has disrupted and altered (im)mobilities for Zimbabwean undocumented migrants in Botswana and South Africa. Interestingly, border jumping – defined as acts of smuggling humans and goods illicitly across borders – has

effectively increased in South Africa, in spite of lockdowns, as compared to pre-lockdown periods (Mambara 2021). In destination countries, precarity increased due to the loss of jobs when national lockdowns were imposed. For undocumented migrants, lockdowns also meant they had no opportunities to leave their dwellings to search for work due to the high police presence, forcing them to resort to invisibility in order to stay under the radar.

The overall effect on their economic survival was severe. Consequently, following the lockdowns in Botswana and South Africa, some migrants opted to return home and presented themselves for voluntary repatriation, as their economic activities had ceased. Due to COVID-19, they therefore went from living and working precariously without legal status, to a new kind of precarity that further victimised an already vulnerable populace. Despite the fact that undocumented migrants from Zimbabwe have always been anchored in precarity, living in Botswana and South Africa as highly deportable subjects (De Genova 2002) and fully aware that deportability forms part of their everyday lives (Galvin 2015), the pandemic further threatened their livelihoods, thereby introducing new vulnerabilities for these migrants as well as the families they had left behind. Either through job losses, restricted mobility or lack of social protection, their precarity worsened.

For migrants, COVID-19 not only threatened their health but also attacked their livelihoods, rendering the virus a multi-dimensional pandemic that attacked from a biological/physical, psychological, social and economic perspective. The new precarities brought about by COVID-19 have introduced a new set of insecurities for undocumented migrants, particularly for those engaged in 3D (dirty, dangerous and demeaning) jobs in South Africa and Botswana. For example, undocumented migrants in Botswana were reported to be on the brink of starvation in April 2020 due to the lockdown and subsequent inability to find work. Moreover, undocumented migrants were initially excluded from food parcels, which were reserved for citizens (Dube 2020).

Consequently, undocumented migrants, left with no choice by the strict lockdown measures adopted by SADC countries in 2020, were left to devise creative strategies of moving across borders in order to sustain their families' livelihoods. At the same time, receiving countries such as South Africa and Botswana also took advantage of

the COVID-19 pandemic to push more restrictive measures to curb the flow of irregular migration, particularly that of Zimbabweans, whose plight has long been identified as a problem in the SADC region. I therefore discuss state responses from the standpoint that COVID-19 was and to date is still being used as a weapon to militarise and securitise borders, particularly in the case of South Africa.

Thus the pandemic, though deadly to everyone, has also presented opportunities for states to assert authority through exclusionary measures driven by self-interest in what others have conceptualised as possibly a rise in COVID-19 nationalism as driven by the pandemic (Woods, Schertzer, Greenfeld, Hughes & Miller-Idris 2020).

### **III. STATE RESPONSES TO UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

When the coronavirus hit Africa in March 2020, South Africa responded by announcing a nationwide lockdown beginning at midnight of the 26<sup>th</sup> of March. A week earlier, the Minister of Public Works, Patricia De Lille, had announced that a 40km fence would be erected on both sides of the Beitbridge border post with Zimbabwe (Zanker and Moyo 2020, Zvomuya 2020). The actual cost of the fence was said to be 40 million South African rand (Veary, Gandar, Walker and Venter 2020). The South African government's justification for erecting this fence was to "ensure that no undocumented or infected persons cross into the country".

This rationale was pronounced at official the government level, even though at that time Zimbabwe only had one confirmed case of COVID-19 whilst South Africa had already reported at least 150 official cases (Zvomuya 2020). On 24 April 2020, the South African Finance Minister Tito Mboweni announced that South Africans should come first for jobs in the post-COVID era (Cohen and Naidoo 2020). Put differently, Mboweni was emphasising the necessity of prioritising jobs for citizens and not foreigners. He also compared South Africa in the 1990s to the current South Africa, remarking that when he returned from exile in the 1990s, about eight out of ten restaurant workers were South Africans but currently, almost 100% were non-South Africans.



Singling out restaurants as an example of foreign worker domination, Mboweni argued that the economy post-lockdown would have questions to answer. He reasoned that “the proportion of South Africans working in a restaurant must be greater than that of non-South Africans” (Cronje 2020). Such pronouncements by senior members of the South African government no doubt instigated intense discussions among South Africans and Zimbabweans alike, a discussion well beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, the minister’s official sentiments cemented and reified already existing xenophobic attitudes towards Zimbabwean migrants, whose presence in South Africa has become more hotly contested, especially since the onset of COVID-19.

Public discourse of anti-Zimbabwean sentiments by South Africans continues to gain momentum on social media platforms, notably on Twitter through the hashtag *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* (see also below). It therefore came as no surprise that the foregoing pronouncements from ministers Mboweni and De Lille garnered a huge fan base on social media platforms from ordinary South Africans. Evidently, in the case of Zimbabwean migrants, COVID nationalism has further heightened xenophobic attitudes towards foreigners in South Africa. As argued by Zanker and Moyo, the South African response reflects an increasingly securitised approach to migration, with lockdown rules put in place in 2020 providing as an opportunity to push for exclusionary policies and to scapegoat migrants and refugees (Zanker and Moyo 2020).

Whilst xenophobia has always existed, it appears the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified existing discrimination, especially towards undocumented migrants whose legal status intersects with their nationality, skills and class, among other variables, to produce multiple vulnerabilities and drawbacks that ultimately affect their livelihoods negatively. With undocumented migrants cast as socio-economic and security dangers, the South African government also passed into law the provision of a Border Management Authority (BMA) with the aim of providing integrated border management services. The BMA reflects an increasingly militarised and securitisation approach to borders by South Africa (Moyo 2020).

Moreover, political, media and public discourse from South Africa is largely responsible for the increasing COVID-19-xenophobia towards Zimbabwean

migrants. Consequently, the official position adopted towards Zimbabwean migrants (both regular and irregular) suggests that the South African government is using the pandemic to intensify pre-existing harsh measures against those seeking entry, through the use of restrictive and harsh policies (Zanker and Moyo 2020). For example, the recently introduced drones, dinghies and helicopters at the Beitbridge border post illustrate opportunities that COVID-19 has presented for South Africa to pursue nationalistic immigration policies whilst framing Zimbabwean migration into South Africa as a humanitarian crisis requiring military-like strategies to be contained, ostensibly in order to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Moreover, although the closing of borders does not necessarily stop the spread of the coronavirus, some governments have justified border closures with this claim. Inevitably, growing nationalism in South Africa has been reinforced by the pandemic, with rising exclusionary and xenophobic attitudes towards migrants. As argued by Bieber (2020), nationalism has indeed become more visible during COVID-19. Ozkirimli refers to this new nationalism as “coronationalism” (Ozkirimli 2020), which seemingly befits the current stance taken by South Africa towards Zimbabwean migrants. Since the advent of COVID-19 in Africa in 2020, marginalised groups such as migrants and refugees have often been framed as carriers of the disease in South Africa, as evidenced by the building of the 40km fence at Beitbridge border post and the justification given for such action by the Minister, i.e. to prevent those with disease from entering South Africa.

According to Bieber, such political sentiments portray to the public that those in power are taking such actions in order to control the disease. Furthermore, the closure of borders, although initiated as a strategy to contain the coronavirus spread, for instance further serves to re-emphasise the importance of citizenship (Bieber 2020) as it clearly demarcates between outsiders and insiders or who to include or exclude. Although a discussion about the popular trending Twitter hashtags *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* and *#ZimbabweansMustGo* is beyond the scope of this paper, some of the sentiments expressed by ordinary citizens’ merit some illustration in order to fully reveal how political sentiments have permeated into public and media discourse in South Africa.

In what can be likened to a virtual war, these particular hashtags have invoked hate speech, cemented xenophobic attitudes towards Zimbabwean migrants and above all revealed the growing impatience of South Africa with its neighbour's prolonged crisis. The textbox below demonstrates this by way of a few examples extracted from Twitter. Notwithstanding the fact that the following tweets are linked to actual persons on this platform, these tweets are in no way exceptions. The main themes that underscore these tweets, namely *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* and *#ZimbabweansMustGo* are continuously mentioned on Twitter and are often the subject of highly polarised insults and counter-insults between South African and Zimbabwean tweeters.

@ZBC news online @News24 South Africa is bleeding through the wound. Illegal immigrants destroyed a 40 million lockdown fence erected to protect us during this difficult time. Zimbabweans in particular are placing us in danger of corona virus resurgence

@Ngcukaitobi *Twitter* April 13, 2020.

Zimbabweans are in all our departments working permanently saying their mothers are Tswana from South Africa! I rest my case, we are screwed! Home Affairs do your job & revoke all permits given to illegal immigrants & send back everyone to his/her country

@Ashante14527204 *Twitter* February 23, 2021.

I don't think Zimbabweans will be happy if they were to compete with South Africans for employment in Zimbabwe, therefore also South Africans are not happy to compete with Zimbabweans for employment in South Africa. So Zimbabweans must go and look for employment in Zimbabwe

@NkhwashuCrown *Twitter* February 21, 2021.

Zimbabweans are forcing themselves into South Africa only to come and kill, steal and destroy South Africa the same way they destroyed Zim, *#ZimbabweansMustGo*

@CrownNkhwashuCrown *Twitter* February 25, 2021.

*#PutSouthAfricansFirst* – xenophobia se gat ... we are tired of tolerating illegal swines#Patriotic SA

@peezyjr *Twitter* February 19, 2021.

Zimbabweans are cruel, don't love South Africans but loves our country, Cable theft, robbery, employment, murders, scammers etc. *#ZimbabweansMustGo*

@Sanc\_SA *Twitter* February 25, 2021.

Zimbabweans to go home and finish what they started, Akeri they chased whites to own land, they must go back home and work the land. SOUTH AFRICANS MUST CHASE THEM BACK HOME, They wanted exactly what they asked for. NOW THEY BURDEN SOUTH AFRICANS *#PUTSOUTHAFRICANSFIRST*

@Lwatti\_RedBerry *Twitter* February 10, 2021.

From the tweets illustrated in the foregoing textbox, there is no doubt that nationalism in South Africa is not only increasingly reflected through political sentiments and media but also through public discourses engendered by access to new technologies of communication such as Twitter platforms. In focusing on the South African response to (im)mobility, this essay illustrates that the closing of borders was not solely used as a strategy to control the pandemic, but rather, the actions and sentiments by the South African government and responses by the general citizenry expose that there were also other motivations under the guise of curbing the spread of the coronavirus. Arguably, the pandemic opened an opportunity for South Africa to put into motion politics of exclusionary nationalism (Zanker and Moyo 2020; Bieber 2020) by enforcing mobility restrictions and using migrants as scapegoats.

Interestingly, in spite of strict immigration controls into South Africa and Botswana, lockdowns from March 2020 and the closure of borders due to the COVID-19 outbreaks worldwide – factors which, combined, may have made mobility more difficult than before – movement across borders was not completely eliminated. Instead, a reinforced migrant agency arguably increased undocumented migration to South Africa and Botswana. Consequently, the subsequent section will briefly illustrate the agency of undocumented migrants in their fight to preserve their livelihoods, by examining the various strategies they adopted in order to travel to and from Zimbabwe to Botswana and South Africa during the lockdown in 2020.

The essay draws mainly from literature on resistance, notably Scott's "weapons of the weak" analogy. In his study of Malayan peasants, Scott argued that peasants subtly engage in everyday forms of resistance in response to domination and power. Scott basically argued that oppression and resistance are in constant flux, and by focusing on collective actions of resistance, it is possible to miss everyday subtle forms of resistance that are highly invisible yet effective (Scott 1985). Thus, Scott's basic argument is that resistance need not be organised or coordinated but can be found in everyday actions of the oppressed (Scott 1985). In view of Scott's theory, this essay therefore contends that Zimbabwean undocumented migrants are agentic human beings who resisted immigration laws and lockdown regulations in the year 2020 in order to pursue their livelihoods. Moreover, acts of resistance practised by these migrants are arguably in response to the state's monopolisation of legitimate movement (Torpey 1998).

#### IV. COUNTER-STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE STATE RESPONSES TO MOBILITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

There is no doubt that the effects of COVID-19 are ubiquitous and everyone has seemingly been affected to some extent. However, for undocumented migrants, the effects have directly targeted their livelihoods, which are dependent on mobility. The introduction of nationwide lockdowns in 2020 in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Botswana left many migrants stranded and unable to fend for themselves. To fully grasp the effects of lockdowns on undocumented migrants, I interviewed ten undocumented migrants in Botswana and South Africa.

I sought to investigate their survival strategies during lockdowns and how they manoeuvred around immigration rules and closed borders. Using this sample, I designed a semi-structured interview schedule and with the assistance of a research assistant, we conducted telephonic interviews with the ten participants. Ethical research protocols of seeking consent and maintaining privacy and confidentiality were followed through the use of pseudonyms during this process. The data collected suggests that although COVID-19 introduced a newer set of challenges for undocumented migrants, especially during lockdowns, it did not succeed in stopping mobility to and from Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa. A migrant domestic worker I spoke to actually laughed when I asked her how she had been able to travel at least twice between Zimbabwe and Botswana during lockdowns. In response she said:

Chipo – domestic worker in Botswana, February 2021

*“My sister, those that were locked down are the rich ones with passports and permits, not us. Borders were closed for legal migrants only, but our borders never closed. Only those with passports know one border where their passports get stamped by immigration, our borders are many and don’t require any documents, just your money to pay ‘malayitsha’ – that’s all.”*

For Farai, a male undocumented migrant in South Africa, life during lockdown became even more difficult and his livelihood was directly threatened, as he could not move within Johannesburg to work odd jobs due to the increased policing of public places. He therefore realised he had to make a choice whether to stay locked in and die of starvation or risk going out to work for his food and rent:

Farai – gardener  
in South Africa,  
February 2021

*“We have been hit by two pandemics, corona and hunger and both can kill us. In fact, we are more likely to die of hunger than corona because corona is a probability but with hunger, death is certain. Lucky for me, I have been here since 2008 so I can speak the local languages. Some of the people whose gardens I work in do not even know that I am from Zimbabwe. I know how xenophobic these guys are, so I always hide my true identity. I do all I can to stay undetected and I blend in very well with the locals here. I dress like a local, speak like a local, walk like a local, so I don’t stand out as that Zimbabwean.”*

Despite South Africa’s tightening of borders for undocumented migrants, some were not deterred from visiting their families even during lockdowns. Tapiwa, a male migrant in South Africa reported that:

Tapiwa –  
South Africa,  
February 2021

*“I have always moved between Zimbabwe and South Africa via [the] Limpopo River, even before Corona. There are people called gumagumas who have always helped us to cross Limpopo river. These gumagumas cross with you and charge a fee per person. I can go to Zimbabwe and come back to South Africa whenever I want to. Limpopo River is my border and there is no lockdown in Limpopo.”*

For others, their strategy involves crossing the South African and Botswana borders in cross-border haulage trucks in order to evade state immigration rules and policies. Tino, an undocumented migrant in Botswana specified that:

Tino –  
Botswana,  
February 2021

*“Since borders were closed, I made use of trucks to cross to the Zimbabwean side and back to Botswana. The truck drivers charged me \$50USD to hide us in their trucks. Although this was expensive for me because I rely on odd jobs, it was the only safe and effective way to use when visiting our families during this pandemic.”*

Some gender differences could be noted in some of the strategies used by undocumented migrants. For instance, for Rumbi, a 21-year-old migrant in South

Africa, border jumping during the pandemic lockdowns had actually doubled in price because human smugglers saw an opportunity to profiteer from desperate migrants. She spoke of a long process of negotiation with a truck driver who had quoted her a price of \$250USD for a one-way trip to Zimbabwe. Her mother was ill, and she was desperate to reach home before her mother died.

In her narrative, Rumbi realised she could use her femininity to her advantage to negotiate the price of her smuggling downwards. She therefore dressed attractively and in no time the truck driver was smitten by her beauty and they somehow “fell in love” during their long journey from South Africa to Zimbabwe:

Rumbi –  
Johannesburg,  
February 2021

*“Over the phone this truck driver was rude and told me to take it or leave it. I was desperate and had no choice. When I met with him, I had cleaned up well, put on make-up and I know that I am a pretty girl. In no time this man was suddenly too polite and very hospitable. I could tell he was slowly falling in love with me. By the time we reached the border, we were the best of friends and liking each other. By the time we arrived in Harare days later, I did not pay a single cent, instead he gave me money to take my mother to hospital. When I wanted to return to Johannesburg after a month, he came and took me back. We are planning to get married once things normalise. I cross back and forth as and when I feel like, I don’t need a real border to move.”*

From the data obtained, strategies employed by undocumented migrants demonstrate migrant agency in the face of hardships. This also illustrates the effectiveness of everyday micro actions by individuals in resisting state power. In situations of vulnerability and precarity, it can be argued, there is always room for agency, no matter the circumstances.

## V. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The preceding narratives are suggestive of migrant agency and repudiate the often taken-for-granted assumption that undocumented migrants are vulnerable and powerless. In this paper, I adopt a subaltern perspective in order to frame migrant counter-strategies as everyday forms of resistance to South Africa’s and Botswana’s immigration policies and lockdown regulations. The paper therefore situates such

counter-strategies within resistance literature, in particular Scott's weapons of the weak theory (Scott 1985).

I thus view undocumented migrants' resistance and rebellion as forms of invisible power, which they draw on to out-manoeuvre the state power that infringes on their right to survival: they resist, but without necessarily confronting or challenging those in power directly. In seeking to understand these everyday acts of resistance (Scott 1985), I argue that these have been effective in sustaining some form of livelihood for undocumented Zimbabwean migrants in neighbouring countries, humble as their earnings or gains may be.

The mere fact that undocumented migrants continue to successfully remain mobile across two or more nation states during lockdowns bears testament to this reasoning. Although at face value their acts of resistance illustrate agency, we need to be mindful of the fact that this kind of agency is not necessarily voluntary or a sign of freedom. Rather, resistance from below (Vigneswaran, Araia, Hoag and Tshabalala 2010) by migrants themselves in collusion with various non-state enablers produce informal economies that run parallel to formal immigration policies and state sanctioned mobility surveillance. It is actually the state's monopolisation of legitimate means of movement (Torpey 1998) that encourages and sustains undocumented migration to South Africa and Botswana.

For undocumented migrants to engage in acts of resistance is invariably an expression of the efficacy of state power – hence, migrants make their own rules and regulations. There is no doubt that the root causes of undocumented migration are what need to be addressed. It is indisputable that undocumented migrants' micro everyday acts of resistance have a significant impact at the macro-level (Mainwaring 2016), hence there is an ongoing interplay between micro or individual actions and the subsequent state responses that materialise at the macro level, e.g. stricter immigration protocols, militarised border surveillance, border technologies, etc. Invariably, these actors have been forced to choose between the COVID-19 pandemic and hunger/starvation. Arguably, due to the irreconcilability of the two, this has left the poor with little or no choice except to choose one over the other, with limited success on either front. Counter-strategies of resistance therefore aim to



sustain livelihoods that are only made possible through mobility and not meant as direct protests to confront state power per se.

The bottom line is survival; this need invokes the migrant agency that is circumscribed by the political power of the state (Mainwaring 2016). Bringing this argument back to the pandemic, COVID-19 has actually intensified the long existing vulnerabilities of those whose livelihoods depend solely on migration. The lockdowns thus compelled undocumented migrants to devise more creative strategies in order to remain mobile with the help of non-state actors. Even in 2021, undocumented migration is not likely to diminish. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that undocumented migrants going to and from South Africa are becoming more creative with their mobility routes.

A recent International Organization for Migration (IOM) Population Mobility Mapping report found that there are 22 illegal entry-exit points at Beitbridge border post, which IOM reports to be suggestive of high levels of illegal migration (IOM 2020). The mobility mapping was conducted as part of the national response plan in order to assist in the detection, prevention and response to infectious diseases through mapping current mobility patterns at the Beitbridge border post. The actions of undocumented migrants have been further reported to be sabotaging the government's efforts to fight COVID-19, especially given that illegal border crossings since the lockdown in 2021 have actually increased by almost 100% as compared to before the lockdown (Mambara 2021).

On 3 January 2021, the South African government introduced a new strategy at Beitbridge border post – to begin the use of army helicopters, drones and dinghies to stop undocumented migrants from crossing across the Limpopo river, yet the irony of it all is that irregular migration has nearly doubled, suggesting that no amount of surveillance will stop this phenomenon. Although in deploying these measures, COVID-19 was not mentioned as a driver, public discourse in South Africa appears to be pushing the narrative that Zimbabwean migrants will spread the virus. An example of such sentiments is expressed in the following tweet: “*So these migrants are investors, investing nyaope in South Africa. Untested Zimbabweans coming back*”

*from Christmas holidays will be bringing in a new strain of corona virus to invest in South Africa” (@BonangayeM 2021).<sup>1</sup>*

In December 2020, there was unprecedented chaos at the Beitbridge border post as traffic queues stretched to more than 15km waiting for clearance at the border. This chaos was blamed on stringent COVID-19 protocols at the border post, which entailed many travellers having to sleep in their vehicles for days. This scenario was labelled a super spreader for the coronavirus, given the appalling conditions at the border and lack of roadside sanitary facilities (Daniel 2020). Sadly, due to delays exacerbated by the pandemic protocols at the Beitbridge border post, at least 15 people died whilst queuing in scorching heat in lines that stretched for about 15km (Prinsloo 2020). Thus the pandemic has exacerbated the risks of cross-border migration even among those who attempt official routes.

Whilst the state possesses self-governing power, frequently termed sovereign power, territorial power does not lie solely in its hands but extends beyond the state to include extra-state actors, whose rules and regulations run parallel to those of governments. Consequently, migration governance in Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa is underpinned by parallel governance structures, rendering immigration laws and regulations legally weak and ineffective in governing migration and securing borders. For effective policies, it is therefore imperative for the SADC to begin by acknowledging that borders have been ineffective and will not work. There are many more invisible borders than formal physical ones.

Moreover, in a region devoid of an effective regional strategy, borders will continue to be fluid, newer invisible borders will continue to emerge, and human smuggling will become even more resolute as undocumented migrants continue to contest state authority and dominance through micro yet effective everyday forms of resistance in pursuit of their livelihoods. As shown above, their actions can be deemed as acts of resistance against exclusion, disadvantage and poverty. The solution therefore lies in regional coordination and most importantly, in giving countries solutions to provide opportunities for their people to pursue their livelihoods at home.

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<sup>1</sup> Nyaope – also known as whoonga is a cocktail of drugs comprising of heroine, marijuana and other narcotic substances which is smoked as a recreational drug in South Africa

Any policy short of this will continue to perpetuate the fugitive existence of undocumented Zimbabwean migrants whilst propagating a “cat-and-mouse” game between the states on the one hand and migrants and non-state actors on the other, thus perpetuating parallel governance structures in immigration.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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