

## Escaping the ‘diaspora trap’: A narrative of struggle and resilience by an unskilled Zimbabwean migrant in South Africa

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### *Abstract*

*Return migration and reintegration have become the latest points of discussion in the global migration studies literature. These discussions often focus on state level decision making and policy formulation without extended engagement with migrants themselves or paying attention to the everyday individual decisions made by “would-be” returnees. In this paper, we engage the notion of return migration in the African context, arguing that the return of migrants to their countries of origin is often indexed against a successful migration journey or a failed one. Such understanding takes account of structural factors outside the control of the individual migrant such as the material conditions in the origin and host countries as well as the expectations of their families and communities. We use data from a life history account of a male Zimbabwean gardener who typifies the material and cognitive struggles of migration and return. We pay attention to his lived experiences as he struggles to navigate expectations, joblessness, exploitation, and precarious work. We also discuss his resilience and determination to meet his migration goals as he meticulously plans his return to Zimbabwe where he intends to start a farming project. Through studying the experiences of this Zimbabwean migrant, we explore the agency with which he manages to circumvent structural constraints and diaspora entrapment which has been the case for many Zimbabweans in South Africa. While existing evidence indicates that skilled migrants are more prone to fall into the ‘diaspora trap’, this study gives insight into the experiences of unskilled migrants and the tools at their disposal to escape the ‘diaspora trap’.*

*Keywords: Return-migration, Zimbabwe, diaspora-trap, South Africa, irregular-migration*

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## Introduction

Return migration and reintegration have found expression in the UN's 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) which seeks "to enhance the creation of conditions for the safe and dignified return, readmission, and reintegration of migrants in irregular situations" (Fakhoury/Mencütek 2023: 962). State-led return migration programs have become common in the European and North American contexts but have not yet found resonance in the African context. There seems to be no appetite from African governments to engage in state funded programs to repatriate irregular migrants to their countries of origin. Instead, in countries such as South Africa there is an over-reliance on costly deportations (Sutton/Vigneswaran 2011). There are several plausible reasons for the lack of uptake for state-led repatriation and/or return initiatives in Africa, which include the dominance of intra-regional migration where most migrants migrate to countries within their regions of origin (Teye/Awumbila/Benneh 2015; Awumbila 2017). Southern Africa has the same experiences as the rest of the African continent, with South Africa continuing to be the continental magnet of immigration from neighboring countries and a considerable proportion being irregular migrants (see for instance, Musoni 2018; 2020). That means, state supported return schemes and repatriation on the scale of countries in the European Union would be unviable from both a cost and logistical point of view. Some authors have observed that even when deported, irregular migrants find their way back into the destination country (see for example, Galvin 2015). In this work, we note the global literature's emphasis on the state level actions where the repatriation of migrants is concerned, and the return migration theories that focus on the structural levels and neglect the perspectives of the migrants themselves. We pay attention to how migrants perceive and engage in return migration, particularly where there is no state sanctioned program to return migrants to their countries of origin. More so on the African continent, where we argue that, the decision by migrants to return to their countries of origin has been theorized in terms of macro-level perspectives that speak to notions of failure and success. Such understanding takes account of structural factors outside the control of the individual migrant such as the material conditions in the origin and host countries as well as the expectations of their families and communities. We ask questions regarding the form that return migration takes in the absence of state funded programs and seek to understand the journeys of those that are left to fend for themselves without the support of both the country of origin and the country of destination. In this work, we engage the story of a male Zimbabwean gardener who typifies the material and cognitive struggles of irregular migration and return. We pay attention to his lived experiences as he struggles to navigate expectations, joblessness, exploitation, and precarious work. We discuss his resilience and determination to meet his migration goals as he meticulously plans his return to Zimbabwe where he intends to start a farming project. Through studying the experiences of this Zimbabwean migrant, we explore the possibilities that migrants have in navigating the "diaspora trap" which Nzima and Moyo (2017) refer to as the involuntary permanent settlement of migrants in the destination countries. The study gives insight into the experiences of unskilled migrants and the tools at their disposal to escape the 'diaspora trap'. We discuss the diaspora trap and southern Africa's history of migrant circulation in the next section.

## **Southern Africa's history of migrant circulation and the emergence of the diaspora trap**

Southern Africa has a long history of migrant circulation, commonly associated with the 1886 discovery of gold in present day Johannesburg, South Africa which accelerated the system of contract labour migration from neighbouring countries to satisfy South Africa's labour demands (Wilson 1976; Moyo/Cossa 2015; Moyo 2020). The recruitment of the labour force from neighbouring countries spanned over a century and only ended in the 1980s (Vosloo 2020). While this was largely a demand driven labour migration system, it inaugurated the long-lasting migration corridors between South Africa and its neighbours which effectively designated South Africa as a country of immigration. South Africa remains an attractive destination to migrants from all over the world due to its stable democratic institutions and the relatively developed economy in comparison to its neighbours. Alongside formal channels of immigration, there are other movements of mainly unskilled immigrants who arrive through irregular means (Musoni 2020). Irregular migration is largely necessitated by the limited avenues for regular migration due to the emphasis on highly skilled immigrants in the Immigration Act of 2002 (Moyo/Zanker 2022). Unskilled and low skilled immigrants therefore have limited avenues to obtain regular documentation in South Africa (Peberdy 2019). Discussions on the presence of immigrants in South Africa touch on numerous aspects of migrant lives, including vulnerability to arrest and deportation (Sutton/Vigneswaran 2011), vulnerability to xenophobic violence (Misago 2016; Misago/Landau 2023) and issues of poor access to documentation and the general abuse of human rights at the hands of the state (Amit/Kruger 2014). On the issue of documentation, the South African government has at varying points implemented special dispensation programs to deal with irregular migrants. The latest being the 2009 decision to implement the Dispensation for Zimbabweans Project (DZP) to regularize the immigration status of undocumented Zimbabweans, provide amnesty to Zimbabweans using fraudulent South African identity documents and also relieve pressure on the asylum system. The permits were renewed as Zimbabwe Special Permits (ZSP) in 2014 and Zimbabwe Exemption Permits (ZEP) in 2017. The government also extended similar special permits to immigrants from Angola in 2013 and Lesotho in 2014. However, in 2022 the minister of home affairs announced the cessation of the Zimbabwe Special Dispensation, giving the holders of the permits 12 months to move to other visas offered by the Immigration Act or return to Zimbabwe. The decision has been challenged in court by Human Rights organizations who question the rationale of the minister for ending the special permits at a time when the conditions in Zimbabwe have not improved and many of the holders have established their lives in South Africa.

There is also scholarship that has focused on remittances by South Africa based Zimbabwean immigrants and the prospects of returning to their country (see for example, Makina 2012, 2013). Dillon (2013) has explored the challenges of return migration that follow a population exodus like that of Zimbabweans. He notes the lack of preparation by the Zimbabwean state for the return of its citizens and the continuing emphasis and creation of channels for formal remittances which indicates an economic interest and income from emigrants rather than their return to Zimbabwe (Dillon 2013). Where return migration is discussed, there is generally an over-emphasis on the developmental benefits of migration in

terms of remittances and in terms of skilled returnees – but there is not much analysis that focuses attention on the unskilled and undocumented migrants. In other contexts, return migration is discussed in the form of temporary visits to the country of origin during holidays or to attend family events (Maphosa 2010).

As noted earlier, South Africa's approach to irregular migrants has been to arrest, detain and deport to countries of origin (Sutton/Vigneswaran 2011). However, undocumented migrants find ways to evade the system and continue working in South Africa as they seek to fulfill the objectives of their migration into the country. It is within this context that we introduce the discussion of what Nzima and Moyo (2017) refer to as the "new diaspora trap". They argue that the dominant theories of return migration – namely, the New Economics of Labour Migration and the Neo-Classical Economic theory of migration – have largely adopted the "failure-success" hypothesis, which posits a binary between failure and success as determinants of return migration (Nzima/Moyo 2017). In this case, migrants return either after having achieved a successful migration experience as perceived by their home community or after a failed experience that leaves them unable to continue living in the diaspora. Nzima and Moyo (2017) are critical of the dominant narratives, which they see as limiting the extent and depth of understanding the migration experiences of immigrants within the Zimbabwe – South Africa migration corridor. The authors adopt a structuralist approach that highlights the contextual factors that may influence the decision by Zimbabwean migrants either to return or stay put in South Africa. They argue that due to circumstances beyond their control, most Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa are subject to the "diaspora trap" and do not return to Zimbabwe, in contrast to the conception of the dominant theories of return migration. As further argued by Sharani (2022), the 'diaspora trap' posits that success or failure in the host country does not guarantee return migration as either outcome can lead to involuntary permanent settlement. In the diaspora trap, there are a variety of factors that dissuade return migration such as the economic conditions in the origin country particularly for migrants who experience economic success (Sharani 2022). Nzima and Moyo (2017) argue that such migrants often battle with class guilt as returning will necessitate sharing their fortunes with stayers who often remain disenfranchised by poor economic conditions in the origin country. Similarly, Sharani (2022) observes that the diaspora trap emphasizes that migrants who experience economic failure in the host country fail to return to protect themselves from embarrassment upon returning home. According to Nzima and Moyo (2017), migrants who experience failure are forced into permanent settlement by the social construction of migrants and the act of migration as success in the origin. Therefore, this means that returning empty handed is often not an option as this is viewed as a betrayal of the expectations of success formed in the pre-migration stage and sustained by stayers. In this work we deploy the "new diaspora trap" framework in our data analysis and framing the experiences of our participant. In our engagement with the participant experiences, we extend the diaspora trap framework which enables us to understand the possibilities of escaping entrapment as conceptualized by Nzima and Moyo.

## Research methodology

In this study, we engage the story of Lovemore, a 33 year old male Zimbabwean gardener who typifies the material and cognitive struggles of migration and return among Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. Despite the commonly shared experiences among groups of people, individuals retain their own unique experiences that can be explored through single narrative studies to yield a deeper understanding of their lived experiences (Also see Pedersen/Zittoun 2022). Therefore, in completing this study, a biographical methodological approach was used. According to Bornat (2008), biographical methods are interpretive in-depth forms of enquiry that include among others life history, oral history, storytelling, and auto biography. Bornat (2008) argues that biographic methods ensure that researchers follow the lived experiences of the research participant comprehensively, focusing on all aspects of their lives. Therefore, in this study we utilized a life history in the form of an unstructured in-depth interview to enable us to understand and interpret Lovemore's lived experiences throughout his journey as a Zimbabwean migrant in South Africa. This method enabled us to better understand his agency and the way he engaged with his immediate environment and his use of social networks in navigating expectations, joblessness, exploitation, and precarious work. In the interview, the participant was allowed to freely narrate his story and the interviewer only interjected when points of clarity were necessary to probe for more details. The interview was conducted in the Free State province of South Africa at a location chosen by the participant. For the purposes of protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of the sole participant, the exact location where the interview was conducted will not be disclosed. The interview lasted approximately two hours and was conducted in both English and IsiNdebele. The interviewer and the participant were both fluent in the two languages.

In conducting this study, we ensured that the principles stated in the Helsinki Declaration for dealing with human subjects in research were adhered to (World Medical Association 2014). These principles must strive to protect human subjects participating in research to ensure their wellbeing and that their rights are respected. Considering these principles, informed consent was sought from the sole participant before any data was collected. We explained the purpose of the study to the participant and his rights to voluntary participation. The participant was made aware that he could pull out from the study any time if he felt uncomfortable and that he had a right to decline answering questions he felt uncomfortable with. In addition, consent was sought for recording the interview. The participant signed the consent form as an indication that he understood the purpose of the study and his rights, thus he accepted to participate and be recorded. Also, to ensure that the participant remained anonymous, a fictitious name (Lovemore) was assigned, and all possible identifiers excluded from the paper such as specific locations. We also committed to ensure confidentiality by using the information only for academic purposes. In addition, a follow up meeting was arranged where the final product was discussed to ensure that the study participant was satisfied with the representation of his account.

The recorded interview was transcribed verbatim and then translated from isiNdebele to English. Thereafter, data were then thematically coded and analysed. In doing this, great attention was placed on the chronological order of events in the account of the participant. We

identified distinct themes in the data and used them as master headings to guide the analysis (Flick 2013; Gibbs 2007). For this paper, we deductively coded data based on the emerging themes guided by the diaspora trap framework (Nzima/Moyo 2017). The developed themes became subheadings under which findings supported by direct quotations from the interview transcript were presented and discussed. In the following sections, we present and discuss the findings from this study.

### **Early life in Zimbabwe: poverty and hope for greener pastures**

Growing up in the deep rural areas of Zimbabwe, Lovemore had a difficult childhood characterized by abject poverty and deprivation. He grew up in a very remote district called Chikombedzi in Masvingo province. In this part of Zimbabwe, there is limited access to basic services such as water, electricity, and physical infrastructure such as accessible roads (Musingafi/Mapuranga/Chikumbu 2015). Like other villagers, his family relied on subsistence agricultural production. While most of the agricultural produce was for consumption purposes, Lovemore's family also cultivated cotton which was sold to earn some income for the family. Despite having income from their surplus production, the income was never enough to sustain their big family. Lovemore's father is a polygamous man with several children. Therefore, the minimal income from their surplus agricultural production could not meet all their needs.

*My father has four wives and two of them speak Shangani and the other two speak Shona and Ndebele. My mother speaks Ndebele hence I also speak Ndebele as well. My father loved Shona and Ndebele women, because of the places he worked in such as Harare and Bulawayo, he was exposed to those women. Even though my father used to go to work as a general hand in these cities, he did not make enough money to take care of all of us.*

In the above excerpt, Lovemore gives a description of his father's four wives two of whom are from the same district while the other two he met while he was a migrant worker in two of Zimbabwe's biggest cities, Harare, and Bulawayo. His father did not have qualifications that could enable him to earn a high income. The small income that Lovemore's father earned from his menial work was split between the needs of his four wives and that of his many children. As a result, Lovemore, and his siblings could not continue attending school due to nonpayment of fees because his parents did not afford to pay. When asked about his education, Lovemore said the following:

*I went up to grade 7 because my parent could not afford to pay for me to go further with my education... I did not qualify for government assistance to fund my education because it was only for orphans. If you were not an orphan, and your parents could not afford to pay School fees you would be chased away from school for non-payment. That is why I was only able to go up to grade 7.*

After leaving school, Lovemore had to join his elder siblings in working in the fields. During this time, he encountered several temporary return migrants from South Africa who spoke of greener pastures beyond the Limpopo River. Though some of them had been deported, they

were determined to raise money and go back to South Africa. Maphosa (2010) reported that temporary returnees often narrate stories of better livelihood opportunities in South Africa. Maphosa (2010) argued that images portrayed by temporary returnees through material symbols such as fashion and their perceived sophistication over stayers, often have an influence in the decision to migrate. These perceived symbols of success and the determination observed from the returnees influenced Lovemore to imagine migration as his only chance of escaping poverty. In addition, Lovemore had an uncle who had worked in South Africa for a long time, and this gave him more confidence in the hope for greener pastures.

*My uncle was already working in South Africa so when he heard that I was not in school anymore and that I was old enough to work for myself, he offered to help me get a job in the farms if I could raise money to come over to South Africa... I raised the money through farming cotton with my father.*

The diaspora trap framework posits that in poor origin communities, there is a ‘success social construct’ that is associated with being a migrant and the act of migration itself (Nzima/Moyo 2017). Therefore, Nzima and Moyo (2017) argue that the perceived images of success among temporary returnees confirm the perceived ‘success social construct’ and thus play an important role in influencing migration decisions. In the case of Lovemore, the decision to migrate was made against the background of his lived experience in poverty that culminated in him dropping out. Also, images of success and narratives of greener pastures told by temporary returnees gave him hope and confidence to make a bold decision to embrace migration as a strategy to escape poverty. It was easy for Lovemore to believe because his own uncle was a migrant and he had shown interest to help him in his quest for a better life. Therefore, he saved money and waited for his uncle to fulfil his promise of getting him to South Africa and help him secure employment.

### **The dangerous journey to South Africa: covered in divine protection?**

Lovemore states that he knew many people who had faced challenges on the journey to South Africa. Some had been arrested before reaching their destination for lack of required documentation such as passports and permits. Therefore, before travelling, Lovemore and his uncle sought divine protection from their church to enable them to have a safe journey.

*There were some individuals that I went to school with that went to look for work in South Africa. Some of them had passports but they were arrested on their way. So, my uncle and I went to our church called Johane Masowe (Apostolic sect) and the prophets prayed for us and told us that everything will go well. They even told us that I will not have any problems with the police when I travel.*

Lovemore did not have a passport. This meant that he could only reach South Africa by following the trails used by border jumpers. With the help of his uncle, he had to avoid being detected by law enforcement agencies such as the police and the army that patrol the border line. Sundberg (2013) reported that it is common for migrants to perform religious rituals prior and during their journey. According to Sundberg (2013) migrants from Mexico have prayer

shrines along the migrant trails to the United States of America where they perform rituals and pray for a safe passage. Similarly, faced with uncertainty about the journey to South Africa, Lovemore and his uncle put their trust in divine protection with the hope to get to South Africa without being apprehended by the police. As reported by Sundberg (2013), the risk in the migrant trail does not only come from law enforcement agencies, but there are other risks such as fatigue, and exposure to gruesome weather elements. Similarly, in the case of Lovemore, it was a rough journey characterised by fear of drowning in the Limpopo River and exposure to dangerous encounters with gangsters and witnessing their cruelty to fellow sojourners.

*I travelled to Beitbridge with my uncle. However, when we got to Beitbridge we could not cross the border through entry point because I did not have a passport. So, my uncle and I had to wait for the water level in the Limpopo River to decrease because... we crossed the river through the 'Chikwalakwala Tiyandolo' side because that is the way that my uncle knew and there wasn't a lot of water there. On that trail we met other men who were also trying to cross to South Africa. These men were running away from gangsters (Amagumaguma), and we joined them as they knew another safe trail... At that time, I didn't know what was going on-, I was just following my uncle. We travelled on foot up to 10pm at night... When you border jump, you come across a fence with a razor wire, and someone must assist by holding the razor wire apart to enable you to fit through the fence and you also hold it apart for the other person to also come through it. After that, there is an electric fence. One of the guys we were with was electrocuted and thrown to the other side of the fence, but he survived. We had to remove our clothes use them as insulation to reduce the level of electricity shock. Border jumping is not an easy thing to do. Also, ahead we came across two more razor wire fences and two more electric fences, but we were able to cross regardless of all the obstacles.*

Previous studies have highlighted the dangers that Zimbabwean irregular migrants face on the migration trails to South Africa (Orner/Holmes 2011; Thebe 2011; Maphosa 2012; Tshabalala 2019). The journey is replete with risks that include drowning or being swept away by the river. Also, the Limpopo River is infested with crocodiles that also threaten the lives of irregular migrants. As observed from Lovemore's experiences, there are obstacles that make the journey particularly dangerous such as security fences that expose irregular migrants to risk of injury or death. Despite all the risks, irregular migrants like Lovemore endure the dangerous journey being driven by their expectations of success and the desire to change their livelihood circumstances (Sundberg 2013; Nzima/Moyo 2017). Other researchers have highlighted the dangers posed by bandits commonly known as 'amagumaguma' who terrorise irregular migrants on the migrant trails (Matose/Maviza/Nunu 2022). While Lovemore and his travelling companions were lucky to evade the bandits, some female migrants on the way were not so lucky. Lovemore narrates his experience with an abused woman that him and his travelling companions encountered on the migrant trail to South Africa.

*While we were walking, we met a woman alone in the bush she said the group that she was with came across 'amagumaguma' and they ran unfortunately she was caught. She was raped by about 20 men, and she was so weak and had no strength to*

*continue walking. We assisted this lady to walk slowly, until we saw the lights at Musina town around 3am. We continued walking slowly in the forest until we got to the main road. We followed the road until we got to Musina town. We saw police and they took the lady that was raped. My uncle and I went to a filling station and waited until morning, and we hitch hiked to Mpumalanga.*

To this day Lovemore is troubled by this experience and wonders what became of that lady who fell victim to the bandits. He is only comforted by the fact that they left the lady in the safe hands of the police and hopes the police got her the help she needed. Matose et al. (2022) reported that Zimbabwean irregular female migrants are at risk as they are bound to be taken advantage of at different levels during migration. Some of the risk factors identified by Matose et al. (2022) include violence and robbery, rape, psycho-emotional harassment, and health risks. While men like Lovemore are also vulnerable to these risks, it is much worse for females. Lovemore managed to reach his destination despite the difficult and dangerous journey without being apprehended by the police. Given his experiences in migrant trail, Lovemore still wonders if the prayers for divine protection prior to the journey were answered or he was just lucky.

### **Precarious work, unmet expectations, and resilience**

Lovemore was accompanied by his uncle until he reached the farms in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa. With the help of his uncle, he was able to secure a job as a farmworker picking fruits. According to Bolt (2010), working in the farms has long been viewed as low status employment in Zimbabwe and thus most irregular Zimbabwean migrants in South African border farms consider this work to be a downwards status mobility. Bolt (2010) further argues that for some Zimbabwean migrant farmworkers, the perceived low status employment is seen as compromising their respectability. Given that Lovemore was unskilled, having dropped out from school in grade seven, he could only qualify for menial jobs such as farmwork. In his new job, Lovemore was less concerned about the low status associated with the job but just happy that he was employed. As a first-time migrant in a foreign country, Lovemore was excited to see fellow Zimbabwean migrant co-workers and that his foreman was also Zimbabwean and spoke the same language as him. This was a relief to Lovemore as he was worried about the communication barriers since he was not able to speak English.

*My uncle said its best I work on a farm because most Zimbabweans without papers work on the farms. The foreman was from Zimbabwe and communication between him, and I was so easy, we also got on very well. I worked on the farm for about a year... they paid us a cash amount of 600 rands a month and that was in 2008... the wages were okay because at the time a cow was going for 2000 rands, so it was possible to save and buy cows.*

Lovemore was coming from a poor background, hence earning an income brought so much optimism for the future. Interestingly, he made sense of his wages by benchmarking them against the price of cows back at home. This gave him hope that it was possible to save and invest in livestock on his return home. However, at that stage, Lovemore had not considered

his living expenses in South Africa. While the employer provided rent free accommodation on the farm, he had to cover the cost of food, clothing and other day to day needs and his income always fell short. As a result, Lovemore's dream to save enough money to buy cows began to fade away. In addition, back at home there was an expectation for him to send remittances, and this put pressure on him.

*In 2008 when I came to South Africa, I thought I would buy livestock back home but when I got here, I realized that life was so difficult and the dreams I had at the time were unattainable on the little money I made each month. When I got here, I also got mixed up with the wrong crowd and I was shown a life I did not know. So, I would get money and buy food, clothes, alcohol, and I often had nothing left to send home... My biggest problem was that my family back home had a misconception that I was living a lavish life since I had moved to South Africa. They have a misconception that there is no poverty in South Africa and once you move here, they expect you to send a lot of money not knowing that I am also living in poverty in South Africa.*

Lovemore came to South Africa during the peak of Zimbabwe's protracted economic crisis in 2008 that was characterized by severe hardship for poor households. Studies show that many households in the country were sustained through remittances coming from countries such as South Africa and the United Kingdom (Bloch 2008; McGregor 2014; Mortensen, 2014). Therefore, at the time it made sense that Lovemore's family expected him to make contributions to the family's livelihood needs. In the above excerpt, Lovemore had encountered the post migration reality described by Nzima and Moyo (2017) as a period when there is a shift in the expectations previously held by the migrant. According to Nzima and Moyo (2017: 364), "pre-migration expectations once commonly shared with their families and communities begin to be seen as unrealistic. However, the family and community back home still subscribe to those expectations." This creates a conflict within the migrant who on the one hand is faced with the reality of sustaining a new life in a foreign country and on the other hand endures the pressure to meet family and community expectations anchored on the migrant 'success social construct' (Nzima/Moyo 2017). In the case of Lovemore, the unmet expectations drew the attention of his uncle who was concerned and decided to go back to the farm where he left him to check on his progress.

*I worked for three years in the farms and in those three years I honestly cannot account for how I spent my money because I had nothing tangible to show for it. I would just buy food, alcohol, and new cellphones. In 2011 my uncle came to visit me at the farm where I worked and asked why I was unable to visit home or send money despite having a job. I informed him that I was not making enough money on the farm. My uncle decided to take me back with him to the Northwest province where he worked even though I did not have a passport.*

Lovemore's uncle was concerned about his nephew's lack of progress and the unmet expectations, and he decided to take him to his place in the Northwest province and assist him to find another job. Also, given that Lovemore was involved with wrong people his uncle suspected that he had succumbed to peer pressure and started wasting some of his money on alcohol. Therefore, his uncle thought that to get him back on track, he must be close to him and

keep an eye on him. Lovemore was happy to join his uncle hoping for better opportunities away from the farms. Upon arrival in Northwest province, he secured a job as a gardener from one of his uncle's bosses who at first was hesitant to recruit an undocumented immigrant. However, Lovemore only lasted two days on that job and was dismissed because he did not know how to operate a lawn mower. This marked the beginning of his life in precarious employment filled with uncertainty.

*My uncle came and got me after I got fired and we lived at his place which was at a dilapidated abandoned building which housed a lot of Zimbabweans and people in need. I stayed there in 2011 and my uncle got me a job with an Indian family to work as a gardener. That family taught me how to use a lawn mower. Then my uncle decided to go and visit the family back home, so the Indian family took me in and gave me a place to stay in their back room. While my uncle was away the family, I was now working for decided to move to the KwaZulu Natal province and they took me with them...After moving I was not paid because they gave me accommodation and food. The family helped me get piece jobs and that is how I got some money for myself. That family was very good to me and kept me well. When I went to KwaZulu Natal province, I lost communication with my uncle and the rest of my family. Then in 2015 we moved again from KwaZulu Natal province to the Free State province.*

Following the above excerpt, on the one hand it appears as if Lovemore was exploited by his new employers because he worked for them for five years without pay. On the other hand, it could be argued that the family took him in after his uncle left and gave him a roof and food, therefore working for them was his way of paying back their generosity. In a study analysing the work conditions of stay-in Basotho female domestic workers in South Africa, Griffin (2011) found that their immigrant status exposed them to exploitation. Similarly, Lovemore's illegal status exposed him to unique exploitability just like the Basotho female domestic workers. According to Griffin (2011), the illegality of the migrant allows the employer to have power over all aspects of the domestic worker's life because it forces the migrant worker to be submissive and dependent on the employer for fear of being detected by law enforcement agencies. Therefore, it could be argued that helping Lovemore to get piece jobs was a way to sanitise this exploitative relationship to keep him earning precarious income as a consolation. Under these working conditions, Lovemore did not only become estranged from his family but drifted further away from fulfilling his migration goals that would lead to a successful return. As argued by Nzima and Moyo (2017), Lovemore had fallen into the diaspora trap because the conditions of his post migration reality had forced him into permanent settlement in South Africa.

### **Turning over a new leaf: re-imagining a successful return**

Lovemore was finally able to amicably part ways with the Indian family that he had been with for five years. Through the help of his former employer, he found employment as an assistant to a local man who had a gardening business. While Lovemore had a good working relationship with his new boss, the wages he earned were still very low. However, Lovemore's priority was

to learn as much as he could from his employer and prove his loyalty with the view to becoming independent.

*At this time my mind was now opened, and I was now older and mature... We worked very well together with my new employer and even the clients started to take notice of my hard work and loyalty, and they would ask where I come from, and I would tell them that I come from Zimbabwe. For me to start working on my own and be my own boss I budgeted my money to buy a lawn mower, at the time I was earning 150 rands a day. So, I was able to save 1000 rands a month to buy my machine. I first bought a small machine before I was able to buy a big one. After that I spoke to my employer and told him that I now want to work on my own, and he was fine with it. We parted ways amicably without any conflict. He only requested that when he has big jobs I come and help him, and that was our agreement. I would often go and assist him with cutting hedges whenever he needed me to. We had a very good working relationship to the point that whenever he had extra jobs, he would call me to assist him, and we share the money equally.*

In the above excerpt, we observe that Lovemore became intentional about turning his life around. After experiencing precarious work and exploitation for a long time since his arrival in South Africa, he finally realized that working independently was the only way he could make something out of his life and realign with his migration goals. To be fully independent, he also found an affordable place to rent in the township. In addition, he was able to save money and buy a smart phone that he used to search for his uncle whom he found through social media. Through his uncle, he was able to reconnect with his family back in Zimbabwe. Step by step, Lovemore began to turnover a new leaf in his life and began to re-imagine and plan his successful return to Zimbabwe. After saving enough money, in 2015 Lovemore visited home for the first time after spending almost eight years in South Africa.

*In 2015 after reconnecting with my parents I visited home. People back home usually want basic commodities like rice, sugar, cooking oil, washing soap, sweets and cookies and chips or snacks. I made sure that I brought these groceries. So, if you visit home without these things family won't be too happy, they will be happy to see you but disappointed that you didn't bring anything for them. When I got home, I bought a cow using my savings that cow has given me more cattle.*

The above excerpt shows that Lovemore had a triumphant return after spending such a lengthy time away from home. He did not go home empty handed and thus he fulfilled the family and community expectations of success. Previous studies have shown that migrants are often supported by family and social networks to migrate, hence there is pressure and expectations of success (Mortensen 2014; Nzima/Moyo 2017). In addition, being able to buy a cow was a big achievement that is celebrated in African communities. Nzima and Moyo (2017) argued that families and communities back home expect migrants to return with tangible symbols of wealth such as cars, livestock, and houses amongst others. Buying a cow on his return set Lovemore apart from failed return migrants. According to Nzima and Moyo (2017), expectations of success can be frustrating, thus some migrants would rather postpone their return indefinitely if these expectations are not met.

*When you don't have money, it becomes very difficult because people back home compete so they will laugh at you when you come empty handed. Neighbors will be saying you have been in South Africa so long and you were only able to come back with the clothes on your back. When you do not have money, you do not go home. I have a brother and sister who have been in South Africa for over 10 years and have never gone back home to visit because they don't have money to travel and buy groceries. I always tell them that it doesn't matter they just need to go and see our parents because that is where they get their blessings. My brother now has a family in South Africa but has never been back home. My sister was sick just last week, and I offered to send her money to go back home but she is afraid to go back empty handed.*

Lovemore's experiences and that of his siblings narrated in the above excerpt confirm and reinforce the argument made by Nzima and Moyo (2017) about conditions that lead migrants into the diaspora trap, characterized by involuntary permanent settlement. Nzima and Moyo (2017) argued that returning to Zimbabwe empty handed contradicts the 'success social construct', therefore, as observed in the above excerpts, Lovemore's sister could not risk returning poor despite being sick. In addition, Nzima and Moyo (2017) argued that some migrants who are successfully integrated socially such as Lovemore's brother who have started families in South Africa are also dissuaded from returning home. This further confirms and reinforces the multi-layered social reality of migration experiences beyond success and failure that contributes to involuntary permanent settlement. Lovemore has managed to be intentional about escaping the diaspora trap and planning his successful return. He has invested in livestock back home to secure his social standing as a successful returnee in the community. Additionally, with his livestock, he has managed to marry a wife from his village so that nothing ties him down in South Africa when the time to return permanently comes.

### **Plans for permanent return**

Lovemore's story captures the material and cognitive struggles of migration and return among Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. In his experiences of joblessness, exploitation, and precarious work he has navigated expectations with a great sense of agency. Now that he has successfully turned his life around, he has begun to craft a plan for his successful permanent return to Zimbabwe.

*I have plans to return to Zimbabwe permanently. When I went home for lobola [bride price] negotiations in 2022 I found that my father had allocated a piece of land for me to build a home and farm on. So now I'm working towards developing my land, so the plan I have is that I want to go back home and take up farming...I intend to plant vegetables, cabbages, sweet potatoes, and peanuts. I also want to do cattle ranching, poultry, keep goats and farm fish. I have already drilled a borehole and bought water storage tanks that will work towards my farming initiatives.*

Lovemore has made concrete steps towards his plans to return home. In the above excerpt, he narrates how he intends to put the plan in motion having acquired communal land from his

father. Farming in Zimbabwe is a very lucrative business that can easily ensure sustainable livelihoods for him and his family. The uptake of small-scale agriculture has been on the increase since Zimbabwe instituted the land reform program in 2001 (Kang'ethe and Serima 2014). Successful small-scale farmers have embraced smart agricultural technologies such as drip irrigation utilizing ground water in the face of recurrent droughts (Masere/Worth 2021). According to Dziva and Kusena (2013) returnees sometimes face challenges financing their agricultural initiatives in Zimbabwe and thus need a lot of capital support. However, Lovemore's case has shown that migrants can plan their return and use their savings to finance their agribusinesses. Lovemore is very optimistic about his project as evidenced by the investments already made towards initiating his farming business using smart technologies. Lovemore has clearly mapped his return with clear timelines, but before that there are some few things to be done.

*What is first on my list for now is to pay off lobola for my wife. I am expecting to have paid off lobola within five months. Then once I have that out of the way, I want to give myself another five months where I start budgeting to go back home and start my farming and developing my land. I am aiming that at least by 2025 I would have raised money for me to move back home to Zimbabwe.*

Lovemore has come a long way to reach the point where he has a clear plan about his return. He has grown from being an exploited irregular immigrant in survival employment to a confident man with a plan. Unlike many Zimbabwean migrants forced into permanent settlement, he has shown great resilience and put in a lot of hard work to change his circumstances. His is a story of a man who despite the challenges managed to navigate expectations with a great sense of agency towards re-imagining a successful return.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have engaged the experiences of Lovemore who migrated from Zimbabwe in search of better economic opportunities in South Africa. Lovemore's experiences speak to a bigger debate on return migration and what it means to the individual migrants who seek ways to live up to the pressure and expectations of a successful migration journey. The story invites academic researchers to turn attention to the everyday decisions that migrants grapple with at destination countries which are often less emphasized when attention is given to state level responses to migration. We engaged Lovemore's account using the diaspora trap framework and have shown the lengths to which some migrants are willing to go in order to meet their migration goals which are often determined by both individual motivation and structural factors in both the origin and destination countries. The discussion adds to the broader literature on return migration within the Zimbabwe – South Africa migration corridor. Also, it adds nuance to the commonly employed return migration frameworks that focus on structural factors and state level decisions (Kleist 2020; Weldemariam/Ayanlade/Borderon/Moslinger 2023). For instance, there is work that has looked at the infrastructure that facilitates remittances from South Africa to Zimbabwe and the lack of attention to issues surrounding return migration (Maphosa 2010; Nzima 2017). We have paid attention to a migrant who is

undocumented and supposedly “unskilled” which is a departure from the common veneration of those who are highly educated and engaged in professional jobs in South Africa (Nzima/Moyo 2017). By shifting the focus to an undocumented and unskilled migrant, we have drawn attention to the agency of the same, arguing that they are capable of planning and are not just helpless victims of circumstances (see also Pedersen/Zittoun 2022) that sway them into either a postponed return or a failed return. The discussion also speaks to the maturing scholarship on Zimbabwean migration beyond the focus on migration journeys and the back-and-forth movements inaugurated by colonial labor practices.

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