

# *Being a Zimbabwean Day Labourer in South Africa*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Zimbabwe's political instability and economic meltdown has caused its citizens to leave the country in search of ways to earn a living for themselves, and to support their families that stay behind. Most professional and qualified Zimbabweans leave the country as legal emigrants and are officially counted. Unskilled individuals, who usually leave as cross-border migrants, are not recorded. These, mostly undocumented, Zimbabweans compete with South Africans for job opportunities and housing in informal settlements.

One specific manifestation of this migration is the increasing number of Zimbabweans standing on street corners in South African cities, waiting for someone to offer them a job. The plight of Zimbabweans working in South Africa has received attention in both the academic and popular press. Most of these articles have focused on farm workers in the rural areas and street vendors in towns/ cities. This is the first article to focus on the experiences of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa. This paper investigates the socio-economic circumstances faced by Zimbabweans working as day labourers in South Africa. It describes their demographic characteristics, employment history and income earned as day labourers, and their day-to-day living conditions.

The 395 respondents for this study were interviewed during a countrywide survey of day labourers in 2007. The paper concludes that it is mainly young Zimbabweans, between the ages of 21 and 30, who resort to this activity. They are better qualified than the average day labourer in South Africa – among them were former teachers, electricians and even a medical doctor. Their income exceeds that of the average day labourer in South Africa. Most of them send money home on a regular basis. It is evident that Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa are better off than their countrymen in other economic activities in South Africa that are exploited and paid less than local workers.

JEL code: J61



## Introduction

Zimbabwe was long considered to be a model example of post-independence progress in Africa. Following a bitter civil war, the country made major advances on both social and economic levels in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> In the 1990s all of this changed. The economy went into free fall, inflation soared, and high levels of unemployment and deep poverty prevailed for sustained periods of time. Zimbabwe's political instability and economic meltdown caused its citizens to leave the country in their droves<sup>5</sup> in search of ways to earn a living for themselves, and to support their families that stayed behind.

It has been argued that North America, Europe and Southern Africa are the preferred potential destinations for skilled emigrants from Zimbabwe.<sup>6</sup> Most professional and qualified Zimbabweans leave the country as legal emigrants and are accounted for in the official statistics of the chosen destinations countries. Unskilled individuals, who usually leave as cross-border migrants, are not recorded. Among these undocumented migrants reasons such as the state of the economy and lack of employment opportunities are frequently given as the main reasons for leaving the country of their birth. Political considerations, though, also play a role.<sup>7</sup>

The vast majority of illegal immigrants from Zimbabwe end up in South Africa. Estimates on the number of Zimbabweans in South Africa vary between 1 and 3 million people.<sup>8</sup> Recent studies seem to indicate a figure of between 1.5 and

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<sup>4</sup> J. Crush and D. Tevera, 'Exiting Zimbabwe', in J. Crush and D. Tevera (eds), *Zimbabwe's Exodus: crisis, Migration, Survival* (Cape Town, Unity Press, 2010), pp. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> S. Morreira, 'Seeking Solidarity: Zimbabwean Undocumented Migrants in Cape Town, 2007', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36, 3 (June 2010), p. 433.

<sup>6</sup> D. Tevera and J. Crush, 'Discontent and Departure: Attitudes of Skilled Zimbabweans Toward Emigration', in J. Crush and D. Tevera (eds), *Zimbabwe's Exodus: crisis, Migration, Survival* (Cape Town, Unity Press, 2010), pp. 123-124.

<sup>7</sup> A. Bloch, 'Gaps in Protection: Undocumented Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa', *Migration Studies Working paper series #38* (July 2008), Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> See for example S. Gordon, 'Exploiting the Exodus: Zimbabwean Economic Refugees in South Africa', *Labour*, 26 October 2007, available at <http://iolresearch.ukzn.ac.za/Container.aspx?printversion=1&ID=11335>, retrieved on 5 June 2010.

2 million people.<sup>9</sup> These, mostly undocumented, Zimbabweans compete with South Africans for job opportunities and housing in informal settlements. The xenophobic reception encountered by many Zimbabweans is captured by the very derogatory term '*amakerre-kwerre*'. This local term describes unwanted immigrants in South African society.<sup>10</sup> The general perception among South Africans is that the Zimbabweans steal jobs that should be available to South Africans, and that their presence lowers wage levels in general.

The plight of Zimbabweans working in South Africa has received attention in the academic, policy and journalistic press. Most of these articles have focused on farm workers<sup>11</sup> in the rural areas (mainly in the Western Cape) and street vendors, selling their goods in South Africa's urban areas. One specific manifestation of this migration, which has hitherto been under-researched, is the increasing number Zimbabweans standing on street corners in South African cities, waiting for someone to offer them any form of temporary employment. As far back as 2004, no fewer than seven per cent of day labourers in Pretoria were of Zimbabwean origin.<sup>12</sup> By 2007, when the survey on which this paper is based was done, this figure had grown to more than 10 per cent – and this was for the whole of South Africa, including rural and urban areas.

In an attempt to start filling this research gap, this article focuses on the daily plight and experiences of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa. Day labouring is a classic example of 'informally employed' workers who actually work in the formal sector, but on a somewhat 'casual' basis. These workers

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<sup>9</sup> A. Hammar, J. McGregor and L. Landau, 'Introduction: Displacing Zimbabwe: Crisis and Construction in Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36, 2 (June 2010), p. 263.

<sup>10</sup> S. Gordon, 'Exploiting the Exodus: Zimbabwean Economic Refugees in South Africa', *Labour*, 26 October 2007, available at <http://iolresearch.ukzn.ac.za/Container.aspx?printversion=1&ID=11335>, retrieved on 5 June 2010.

<sup>11</sup> See M. Bolt, 'Camaraderie and its Discontents: Class Consciousness, Ethnicity and Divergent Masculinities among Zimbabwean Migrant Farmworkers in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36, 2 (June 2010), p. 377.

<sup>12</sup> P. Blaauw, H. Louw and R. Schenck, 'The Employment History of Day labourers in South Africa and the Income They Earn – a Case Study of Day Labourers in Pretoria', *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, NS 9, 4 (2006), p.462.

compete with formal sector workers via their generally lower wage rates.<sup>13</sup> This paper investigates the socio-economic circumstances faced by Zimbabweans working as day labourers in South Africa. It describes their demographic characteristics, employment history and income earned as day labourers, and their day-to-day living conditions.

### **Background: literature on Zimbabwean migrants**

The first set of literature on Zimbabwean migrants focuses on their status in terms of the stringent standards imposed by South Africa's Refugee Act. Under this legal framework, Zimbabwean migrants are considered to be economic refugees rather than refugees proper.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that the Zimbabweans in question have no political rights, they serve an economic purpose. They are regarded as a cheap source of labour.<sup>15</sup> Rutherford describes their lack of or ambiguous documentation as an important factor in keeping Zimbabweans in a largely unprotected pool of labour.<sup>16</sup>

Further studies on Zimbabwean migrants attempted to form a demographic picture of those living in South Africa. Daniel Makina conducted a survey in June and July 2007 among 4,654 Zimbabwean migrants in Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville (suburbs in the vicinity of the centre of the Johannesburg).<sup>17</sup> The results revealed a gender split of 41 per cent female and 59 per cent male. The migrants were fairly young, with 85 per cent of the respondents younger than 40 years. For the destination country the migrants represent a theoretical brain-gain, as they are mostly better qualified than the non-migrant population in South Africa. No fewer than 40 per cent completed a post-school

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<sup>13</sup> R. Davies and J Thurlow, 'Formal-Informal linkages and unemployment in South Africa', *South African Journal of Economics*, 78, 4 (December 2010), p. 440.

<sup>14</sup> S. Gordon, 'Exploiting the Exodus: Zimbabwean Economic Refugees in South Africa', *Labour*, 26 October 2007, available at <http://iolresearch.ukzn.ac.za/Container.aspx?printversion=1&ID=11335>, retrieved on 5 June 2010.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> B. Rutherford, 'An Unsettled Belonging: Zimbabwean Farm Workers in Limpopo Province, South Africa', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 26, 4(2008), pp. 401 – 15.

<sup>17</sup> D. Makina, 'Survey of Profile of Migrant Zimbabweans in South Africa: A Pilot Study, Research Report, University of South Africa, 2007, pp. 1 – 10.

qualification and 605 at least completed secondary school.<sup>18</sup> However, illegal migrants have great difficulty finding employment in spite of the advantageous levels of human capital.<sup>19</sup>

Undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers for the most part end up in unregulated labour markets. Here they work long hours, earning low levels of income. A further feature is the very real danger of deskilling, as many do not use their qualifications as a result of being underemployed.<sup>20</sup> In spite of this reality, studies indicate that between 81 and 90 per cent of the migrants send remittances home on a regular basis.<sup>21</sup> In fact, some research indicates that Zimbabwean migrants send more than 50 per cent of their earnings back home. They survive on the meagre amount that remains. In the words of one woman, talking to Refugee International: 'If I eat, then my children will not.'<sup>22</sup>

These remittances can be sent home only if tremendous sacrifices are made by Zimbabwean migrants in terms of the way they live in South Africa.<sup>23</sup> Studies focusing on these aspects reveal a disturbing reality. Zimbabweans are often forced to live in shared apartments. Here 20 or more people take turns to sleep. Some are much less fortunate. These people sleep in the streets, at bus stations, in half-built homes at construction sites or in informal settlements. Some find refuge in churches.<sup>24</sup> People living in this circumstances certainly experience levels of food insecurity and are extremely

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> V. Kalitanyi and K. Visser, 'African Immigrants in South Africa: Job takers or Job Creators', *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, NS 13, 4 (2010), p. 381.

<sup>20</sup> A. Bloch, 'Gaps in Protection: Undocumented Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa', *Migration Studies Working paper series #38* (July 2008), Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 1-19.

<sup>21</sup> See for example S. Gordon, 'Exploiting the Exodus: Zimbabwean Economic Refugees in South Africa', *Labour*, 26 October 2007; M. Kiwanuka and T. Monson, 'Zimbabwean migration into Southern Africa: new trends and responses', (November 2009), Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 1 - 92. and A. Bloch, 'Gaps in Protection: Undocumented Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa'.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Refugees International, 'Zimbabwe Exodus: Too Little, but Not Too Late...', Bulletin, 7 November 2007, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> E. Worby, 'Address Unknown: The temporality of Displacement and the Ethics of Disconnection among Zimbabwean Migrants in Johannesburg', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36, 2 (June 2010), pp. 417 – 431.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* and M. Kiwanuka and T. Monson, 'Zimbabwean migration into Southern Africa: new trends and responses', (November 2009), Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 1 - 92.

vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. This raises the question as to what the socio-economic circumstances of Zimbabwean day labourers are, as they are competing in an informal labour market where there is serious competition for limited part-time employment. The research design of this study is aimed at providing answers to this question for the first time.

## **Research design**

Day labouring has emerged as a worldwide phenomenon, with a steady increase in the number of people congregating each day on street corners, waiting for somebody to offer them a job. Day labouring in the developed world has different characteristics from those in the developing world. In the United States of America, day labouring serves as an entry point into the labour market for mostly migrant workers, who hope to make the transition into the formal economy. The entry point function is also true for many Zimbabwean migrants who find their way onto the street corners of South African cities. However, this is where the similarity ends. In a developing country like South Africa the day labour market serves as a catchment area for the fallout from a formal economy unable to provide employment to all of those who want it. Once in this pool of mostly unskilled labour, the chance of a return or first transition into the formal economy is very limited, and the existing levels of human capital can be eroded very quickly.<sup>25</sup> Deskilling is therefore a reality faced by South African-born day labourers and Zimbabwean migrants in this market alike.

Since to date no countrywide research has been done on day labourers in South Africa, a countrywide survey among day labourers was planned and undertaken between 2005 and the end of 2007. The research commenced in 2005 with a course of action during which all municipalities in South Africa, churches and other welfare organisations as well as the Department of Labour were contacted as a first step to determine in which towns and cities in

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<sup>25</sup> See P. Blaauw, H. Louw and R. Schenck, 'The Employment History of Day labourers in South Africa and the Income They Earn – a Case Study of Day Labourers in Pretoria', *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, NS 9, 4 (2006), pp. 458 - 71.

South Africa people are engaged in day labouring.<sup>26</sup> Other sources on the numbers involved were consulted, such as non-governmental organisations. There are nearly 1,000 places in South Africa where a minimum of 45,000 mostly black African men stand and wait to be picked up for day labour.<sup>27</sup>

The information gathered was used to plan a methodical procedure to approximate the number of day labourers in South Africa. The rest of 2005 and 2006 were used to go around the country and physically count the number of day labourers in the various cities and towns and to conduct preliminary interviews using a short set of structured questions.<sup>28</sup>

The sample population earmarked for the research was scientifically determined based on the above information. A sample of 10 per cent was regarded as sufficient to control for possible sampling error.<sup>29</sup> For the sample to be accepted as representative, between five and 10 per cent of the research population had to be interviewed countrywide. A proportional sample of nine per cent was ultimately used as a benchmark for a suitable sample size for the number of interviews to be conducted in the towns and cities across South Africa.

It was estimated that a total of between 2,500 and 4,000 interviews had to be conducted across South Africa in order to obtain a representative sample of the research population. For this purpose, a detailed questionnaire had to be designed. The questionnaire that was used in the 2004 Pretoria survey<sup>30</sup> laid the groundwork for the formulation of the questionnaire for the countrywide interviews. The questionnaire was designed in a multi-stage process. The draft was also subjected to a trial run before the final adjustments were made.

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<sup>26</sup> A. Harmse, P.F. Blaauw and R. Schenck, 'Day labourers, unemployment and socio-economic development in South Africa', *Urban Forum*, 20, 4 (2009), pp. 363 - 377.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> A.S. de Vos, H. Strydom, C.B. Fouche and C.S.L. Delpont, *Research at the Grass Roots: for the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Pretoria, Van Schaik, 2004), p. 200.

<sup>30</sup> See P. Blaauw, H. Louw and R. Schenck, 'The Employment History of Day labourers in South Africa and the Income They Earn – a Case Study of Day Labourers in Pretoria', *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, NS 9, 4 (2006), pp. 458 - 71.

A committed fieldworker was hired, and she received extensive training. She could speak several of the official languages of South Africa and was able to travel extensively through the country to conduct interviews. The authors did all the fieldwork in the Northern Cape Province. In the bigger metropolitan areas students in the Department of Social Work at the University of South Africa were recruited as additional fieldworkers. They too underwent a meticulous training process. The fieldwork commenced towards the end of February 2007 and was completed by the end of November 2007. At this stage of the research, a number of questionnaires that were deemed to be unreadable or otherwise lacking in quality were discarded. The sample was checked to make sure that the essential proportionality in terms of the regional distribution was maintained. Just over 3,800 questionnaires were accepted as suitable for the study.

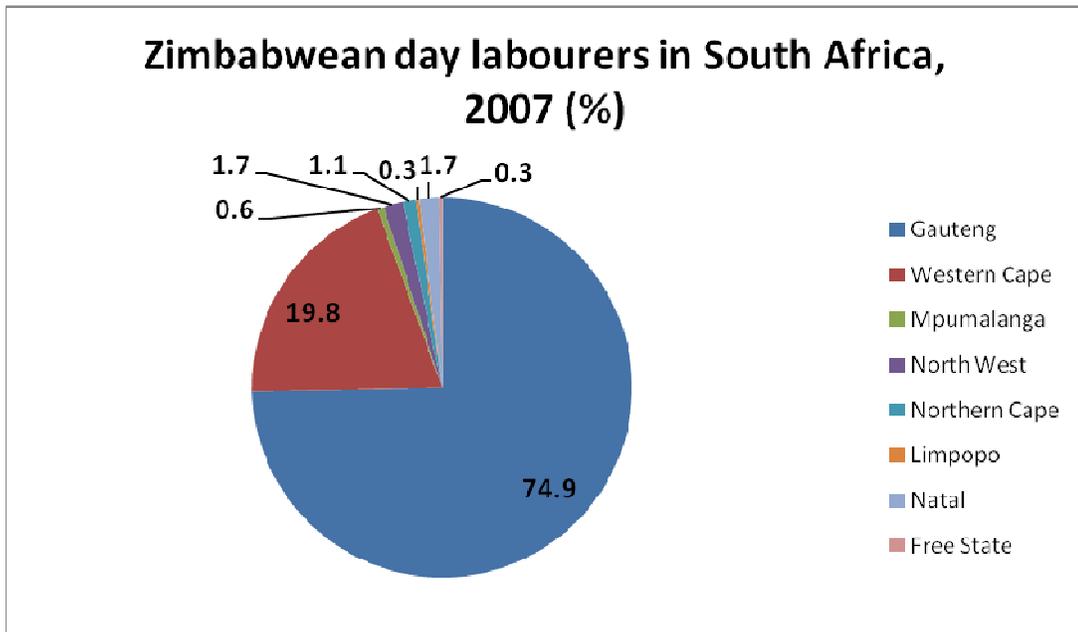
The research revealed that 395 respondents indicated that they originate from Zimbabwe. This sub-sample is used in the analysis that follows to achieve the stated aim of this study. Given the rigour applied in the research design, this sub-sample serves the important purpose of shedding light on the daily reality of being a Zimbabwean involved in this informal labour market activity. The results of the analysis are presented in the empirical section, which follows.

## **Demographic features of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa**

### **Location and legal status**

Figure 1 provides a graphical presentation of the distribution of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa.

Figure 1: Distribution of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa, 2007.  
(Percentage per province)



Source: Survey data

The majority of the Zimbabwean day labourers were standing at sites in Gauteng (Johannesburg and Pretoria). The second most popular province is the Western Cape and the Cape Town metropolis. Surprisingly few Zimbabwean day labourers were observed in Limpopo, the South African province neighbouring Zimbabwe. This can be attributed to fear of harassment by police and an attempt to avoid creating suspicion.

These migrant workers usually lead a nomadic life. 75 per cent of them indicated that they have had stand at other sites before the current one. On average they had been at 2.69 other sites before the one they were interviewed at. Once they find a site that provides relatively well, they tend to stick to it. Their choice of site is mainly influenced by the size (day labourers tend to flock to the bigger hiring sites) and word of mouth (reports from fellow day labourers about the conditions and work opportunities). In fact, 59 per cent of the day labourers indicated that the work opportunities at their current site were actually better than what they expected; 33 per cent felt that they were worse than expected, and a mere 8 per cent were content that it was in line with expectations. Their commitment to their families and dependants in

Zimbabwe was evident in the fact that, overwhelmingly, their answer to the question as to why they were still active as day labourers if the opportunities were worse than expected: they needed the money to support their families in Zimbabwe.

In order to clarify their official status in South Africa, all 395 day labourers who indicated that they originated from Zimbabwe were asked by the fieldworkers to show them any kind of formal documentation to prove their status in South Africa. Six per cent of the respondents could produce a South African ID or passport. Almost 11 per cent held a visitors' passport or visa. However, the majority of the Zimbabwean day labourers active in South Africa acknowledged that they are in the country illegally and could not display any form of official documentation. This confirms the conclusion in the literature that the majority of Zimbabwean migrants are in the country illegally. This renders these people potentially vulnerable, and the evidence of abuse, corruption and other forms of mistreatment bore testimony to this.<sup>31</sup>

The gender and other demographic characteristics of the Zimbabwean day labourers were further scrutinised.

## **Gender**

As could be expected in this harsh and unprotected environment, there were very few female day labourers among the Zimbabweans: only 13 out of the 395 of the sample were female. This proportion corresponds well with that of South African-born day labourers who formed part of the same study.

## **Age**

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<sup>31</sup> See for example the Forced Migration Studies Programme (FMSP) and the Musina Legal Advice Office (MSLA), '*Special Report: Fact or Fiction? Examining Zimbabwean Cross-Border Migration into South Africa*', (Johannesburg, 4 September 2007), pp. 1 - 13 as well as S. Morreira, 'Seeking Solidarity: Zimbabwean Undocumented Migrants in Cape Town, 2007', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36, 3 (June 2010), pp. 433 - 48.

The age distribution of the respondents was determined in order to compare it with the results of studies on Zimbabwean migrants in general.

Table 1: Age distribution of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa, 2007

<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
under 21	13
21-25	114
26-30	123
31-35	57
36-40	33
41-45	11
46-50	4
51-55	0
56-60	0
60+	1
Did not answer	39
<b>Total</b>	<b>395</b>

Source: Survey data

No fewer than 70 per cent of respondents who answered the age question were 30 years old or younger. In fact, more than 95 per cent of these Zimbabwean day labourers were younger than 40. This corresponds well with the findings of other studies on Zimbabwean migrants. As reported earlier, more than 70 per cent of Zimbabwean migrants in the Makina study were younger than 40.<sup>32</sup> The Zimbabwean day labourers are therefore even younger than Zimbabwean migrants in general. The high proportion of day labourers younger than 40 reflects the intense physical nature of the activities they engage in. Hard manual labour in the construction industry is a typical example of this, requiring a significant level of physical effort and endurance.

## **Education**

Comparing the level of schooling of Zimbabwean day labourers to South African day labourers indicates contrasting levels of accumulated human capital.

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<sup>32</sup> See D. Makina, 'Survey of Profile of Migrant Zimbabweans in South Africa: A Pilot Study, Research Report, University of South Africa, 2007, pp. 1 – 10 as well as A. Bloch, 'Gaps in Protection: Undocumented Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa', *Migration Studies Working paper series #38* (July 2008), Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 1-19.

Table 2: Level of schooling of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa, 2007

Level of schooling	% of Zimbabwean day labourers	% of all day labourers in South Africa
No schooling	2.25	6.00
Some primary schooling	4.79	18.70
Completed primary schooling	8.17	9.20
Some secondary schooling	21.97	48.70
Completed secondary schooling	50.99	14.80
Post-school qualification	11.83	1.90
Total	100.00	100.00

Source: Survey data

Table 2 confirms the results of other studies, indicating the relatively high levels of schooling of Zimbabwean migrants.<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that the official migrants in the Bloch study had even higher levels of formal schooling.<sup>34</sup> This is to be expected, as higher levels of education, and professional qualifications in particular, make it easier to immigrate through official channels. The relatively high levels of training of Zimbabwean day labourers compared to the rest of day labourers active in SA further underlines the desperation of these migrants in trying to secure a living for themselves and their dependants.

Together with their relatively high levels of schooling, 86 per cent of the Zimbabwean day labourers indicated that they can understand and speak English well. Their language proficiency combined with their high level of schooling allows them to communicate easily with potential employers and may be a competitive advantage in the competition for available temporary employment opportunities.

Other demographic information that sheds light on the daily existence of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa is their marital status and number of dependants.

<sup>33</sup> See for example D. Makina, 'Survey of Profile of Migrant Zimbabweans in South Africa: A Pilot Study, Research Report, University of South Africa, 2007, pp. 1 – 10.

<sup>34</sup> A. Bloch, 'Gaps in Protection: Undocumented Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa', *Migration Studies Working paper series #38* (July 2008), Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 1-19.

## **Marital status and dependants**

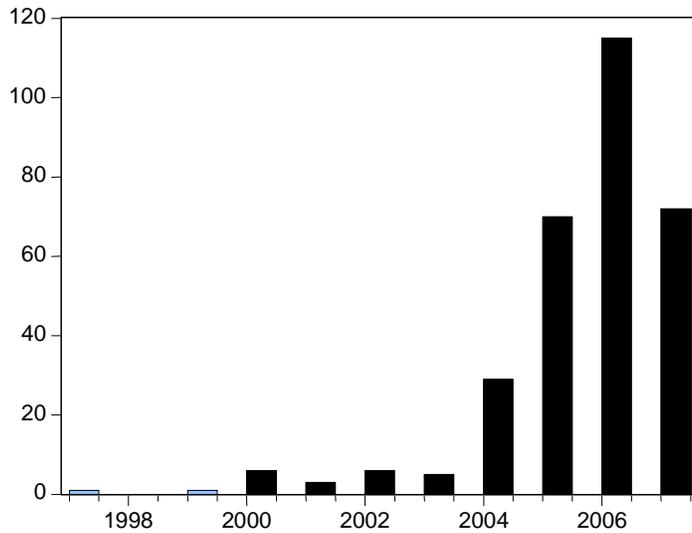
In terms of marital status, the sample was almost equally divided between married individuals and those who described themselves as being single. On the issue of children, 219 (44 per cent) of the respondents indicated that they did have children. These 219 respondents on average had 2.53 children each. The issue of dependants was probed further in the questionnaire, given the expectation and reports that Zimbabwean immigrants support a significant number of people in the country of origin. To this end, one of the questions in the questionnaire asked the day labourers how many people, apart from themselves, depended on their income. Their answers ranged from 0 to 20, with an average of 4.8. This is significantly higher than the overall average of four for all day labourers in South Africa. These workers therefore are not only responsible for the upkeep of themselves, their children and the mothers of their children, but for many more – highly likely to be family members.

This raises the question as to how successful they are in their endeavour to support their dependants by engaging in the day labour market in South Africa. The survey probed this issue with appropriate questions in terms of the employment history and income earned by Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa.

## **The employment history of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa**

In order to determine when and for how long the respondents were engaged in day labouring two questions were included. The first question concerned the year when the respective day labourers started to stand at street corners in an attempt to find work as day labourers. The responses of the 308 respondents who were willing to answer this question are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The number of Zimbabweans commencing with day labouring in South Africa per year



Source: Survey data

Since 2004 there has been a marked increase in this activity – corresponding to the accelerated economic meltdown and resulting hardship in Zimbabwe at the time – reaching a peak in 2006. The second question asked ‘how many years and months they have been standing as day labourers in total’. The average is a year and a half, which corresponds to the information in Figure 2.

To assess the employment history of the Zimbabwean day labourers further, it was important to know whether they had ever had fulltime employment before and if they were currently looking for fulltime employment. An overwhelming majority (93 per cent) of these workers indicated that they were actually looking for a fulltime job / position. This is the case even though just less than half of them had ever had a fulltime job. Given the relatively young sample, it can be expected that they had not held a fulltime position before.

The desperation of these Zimbabweans to earn a living became even more evident from the list of previous jobs they held. Among the 159 who stated their previous positions, there were: one medical doctor, five electricians, one mechanic, three police officers, 33 sales assistants, and no fewer than 30 teachers. This again confirms the underemployment of Zimbabwean migrants,

as was found in other studies on the broader Zimbabwean migrant population in South Africa.<sup>35</sup>

The kind of jobs, activities and duties performed by the Zimbabwean day labourers were identified by asking respondents to list the kind of jobs they did get in the month preceding the interview. As could be expected, the majority are physical and hard labour, performed outside under sometimes severe climatic conditions. Gardening was the most common activity, followed by loading and unloading, digging, bricklaying, construction and painting. This echoes the results of other studies on Zimbabwean migrants in general.<sup>36</sup>

Most of the activities were perceived as not to be dangerous. This is mirrored by the low number of workers who indicated that they had suffered a serious injury during the past year of day labouring that prevented them from working for some time. Only 21 out of 282 (only 7.4 per cent) respondents who were willing to answer this question maintained that an injury prevented them of working for some time. It is also interesting to note that this is in sharp contrast to studies in the United States among day labourers there, where workplace injury was of serious concern to Latin American migrants.<sup>37</sup>

We turn now to an analysis of the income earned by Zimbabwean day labourers as the outcome of their endeavours in this informal labour market activity.

### **The income earned by Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa**

Day labourers in general are hired on a daily basis with no official contract. As a result, it would not make sense to ask them about their monthly pay / wage. Accurately establishing their income levels is further complicated by the infrequency of them being hired. The questionnaire therefore included several

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<sup>35</sup> See for example A. Bloch, 'Gaps in Protection: Undocumented Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa', *Migration Studies Working paper series #38* (July 2008), Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 1-19.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p.12.

<sup>37</sup> A. Valenzuela Jr., N. Theodore, E. Meléndez and A.L. Gonzalez, '*On the corner: Day labor in the United States*', (Los Angeles, UCLA, 2006), p. 12.

questions focusing on the income they receive. Table 3 summarises the survey findings in this regard.

Table 3: Comparing income variables for day labourers in South Africa, 2007

Income Indicator	Average (R values)		
	Zimbabweans	South Africans	Full sample
Lowest wage received for a day's work	63	57	57
Best wage received for a day's work	142	117	120
Lowest wage day labourer is willing to work for	112	102	103
Earnings during a good week	469	373	387
Earnings during a bad week	171	163	164

Source: Survey data

Respondents on average were willing to work for at least R112 per day. The fact that they receive an average of R63 on a bad day further underlines their vulnerability and desperation – even though they may have a reservation wage, a lower wage is better than no wage. On the positive side, the average wage on a good day exceeds their minimum expectations.

Zimbabwean and South African day labourers are faced with a challenge on two fronts. There are the unfulfilled expectations in terms of their reservation wage and resultant seemingly low levels of daily income to contend with. Day labourers also face highly irregular hiring patterns. The variance in the daily wages earned highlights the uncertainty experienced by the day labourers in terms of their income if they do find employment.

To put the above amounts into further perspective, they were compared to available 2007 minimum subsistence levels for various South African household sizes. Conservatively, the following were the minimum amounts needed to support household sizes from one to five members: R1,023;

R1,261; R1,635; R1,998 and R2,380 for five members.<sup>38</sup> Looking at different scenarios, the average Zimbabwean day labourer will need four good weeks in a row to be able to support himself and three other people in South Africa. This is a highly unlikely scenario given the infrequent hiring patterns emerging from the survey. Even four good weeks in a row, however, would not enable him to support a five-member household. When times are bad, a typical Zimbabwean day labourer is barely able to support himself, let alone any dependants.

The most significant aspect of Table 3 is that the Zimbabweans, during a good week, earn more than their South Africa compatriots standing on street corners. The difference in the average wage of Zimbabwean and South African day labourers is statistically significant in no fewer than four of the five income variables in Table 3. This is in stark contrast with the expectation (and experience) in some other labour markets, where the Zimbabweans, and foreigners in general, are paid less than the local workers. The perception that foreigners (in this case Zimbabweans) push down wages in this particular informal labour market is unfounded.

The question, then, is what can explain this pricing behaviour of employers? One possibility is the role of human capital, given the higher levels of schooling of Zimbabwean day labourers. Higher wages in good times may reflect a premium for their higher level of education and superior reliability. This much is reflected in informal interviews with some employers, who suggested that Zimbabwean workers are more productive and reliable than South Africans. This notion needs to be scientifically tested, which opens up the scope for survey research on the employer side of the day labour market. Since there is no legislation, trade unions or any other form of regulation in this market, employers are expected to pay workers according to what they believe them to be worth, thus accurately reflecting their marginal revenue product in terms of classical labour market theory. It must be noted, however,

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<sup>38</sup> R. Mears and P.F. Blaauw, 'Levels of poverty and the poverty gap in rural Limpopo', *Acta Commercii*, 10 (2010), pp. 89 – 106.

that when times are bad for day labourers the difference in wages is much less marked.

The subjective perceptions of day labourers regarding their income were tested by another question in the questionnaire, where 58 per cent of respondents indicated that their earnings as day labourers were actually better than they expected them to be. Around 33 per cent felt that earnings were worse than expected and for only eight per cent were they in line with expectations.

In response to the question as to why they were still standing there if the income did not match expectations, the overwhelming majority indicated that they needed the money to help their families that remained behind in Zimbabwe. The survey did not ask for the specific amount of money that they send home. As mentioned in the literature review, research findings suggest that Zimbabwean migrants spend up to 50 per cent of the meagre earnings to support their dependants back home.<sup>39</sup> The respondents were however asked how often they sent money home, and the role of marital status in this process was probed as well. Tables 4 and 5 provide the findings in summary form.

Table 4: Frequency of Zimbabwean day labourers' remittances, 2007

<b>How often is money sent home?</b>	<b>No. of respondents who answered question</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Weekly	6	1.97
Monthly	87	28.52
Four times per year	122	40.00
Twice per year	28	9.18
Once per year	28	9.18
Do not send money home	34	11.15
	<b>305</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Survey data

Apart from the 11 per cent who indicated that they did not send money home at all, the majority sent money home four times per year or on a monthly

<sup>39</sup> See for example M. Kiwanuka and T. Monson, 'Zimbabwean migration into Southern Africa: new trends and responses', (November 2009), Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 1 - 92.

basis. This again corresponds well to the findings of other studies on Zimbabwean migrants.<sup>40</sup> These remittances are of great importance for those left behind, especially in the case of close family members and children.<sup>41</sup>

Table 5: Frequency of single versus coupled Zimbabwean day labourers' remittances, 2007

How often is money sent home?	% of respondents single	% of respondents coupled
Weekly	2.04	1.94
Monthly	28.57	28.39
Four times per year	26.53	52.90
Twice per year	11.56	6.45
Once per year	12.93	5.81
Do not send money home	18.37	4.52
	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Survey data

Table 5 shows the difference in the remittances between single (single, divorced or widowed) and coupled individuals (married or living with partner). In terms of percentages, despite the category of marriage status, the same percentage of the two groups send money home on a weekly and monthly basis. The difference between the groups becomes evident in the figures showing the sending home of money less frequently. Of the single group 57 per cent send money home four times a year or more regularly. Of the coupled group, 83 per cent send money home four times per year or more frequently. The single day labourers thus send money home less frequently than the coupled ones.

The low levels of income and the importance of sending remittances home to family and other dependants raise the question as to how the Zimbabwean day labourers cope. How do they manage to survive materially, give the uncertain and low income that they earn on average? This constitutes the topic of the final section of the paper, i.e. a look at the daily life of the Zimbabwean day labourer in South Africa.

<sup>40</sup> S. Gordon, 'Exploiting the Exodus: Zimbabwean Economic Refugees in South Africa', *Labour*, 26 October 2007.

<sup>41</sup> See for example A. Bloch, 'Gaps in Protection: Undocumented Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa', *Migration Studies Working paper series #38* (July 2008), Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, p. 13.

## The daily lives of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa

### Where do they sleep?

The people involved in this activity lead harsh lives, many of them being separated from their family members for long periods of time. This raises the question as to what the individual circumstances of these people are like. Respondents were asked where they sleep at night and the responses were quite varied, as can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6: Type of dwelling where Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa sleep at night, 2007

Type of dwelling	Number of respondents	% of respondents that answered the question
Construction Site	14	4.02
Backyard room with sleep-in domestic worker	2	0.57
Backyard room	36	10.34
Veld/bushes	21	6.03
On the street	5	1.44
Backyard shack	53	15.23
Shack	171	49.14
Hostel/shelter	7	2.01
House (bricks/reeds etc)	22	6.32
Place of work	0	0.00
Other and not answered	17	4.89
Did not answer	47	
<b>Total</b>	<b>395</b>	

Source: Survey data

From Table 6, it is evident that only 19 per cent of the Zimbabwean day labourers who answered this question sleep in some kind of formal accommodation. Most of them simply cannot afford this comfort.

### **Food security**

In terms of own food security as part their basic needs, the research revealed the following trends. The majority of Zimbabwean day labourers are responsible for their own food needs. Only seven per cent of them indicated that other people sometimes or always provide them with food at the hiring site where they stand. The question was then asked as to where the day labourers get their food from.

Most day labourers bring their own food with them to the hiring site or buy food during the day. In certain cases the employer does provide food, and sometimes fellow day labourers even provide others with food in cases of emergency.

Given the need to provide their own food on inadequate wages, it is not unexpected that 62 per cent of the respondents who answered the related question indicated that during the week prior to the interview, they did not have enough food to eat. A quarter (26 per cent) testified that they had enough to eat, but not the type of food that they would have preferred. Only one in every ten Zimbabwean day labourers were able to say that they had enough to eat and it was the food that they would have preferred.

### **Social support and encounters with the South African Police Service (SAPS)**

Social resources reduce the negative consequences of stressful events and can help to maintain the psychological as well as physical well-being of

people.<sup>42</sup> Standing at the side of the road, hoping to obtain employment vital to support distant dependants with money, food, durable goods and clothes,<sup>43</sup> certainly qualifies as an example of such an event. The social reality of Zimbabweans leaving their country and families to earn a living is underlined by the fact that only 11 per cent of these day labourers indicated that they stay with their families. The majority, who do not stay with their families, visit them once a year or even less frequently.

Being away from their families, in another country, day labourers have to turn to each other for support. Indeed, 84 per cent of the Zimbabwean day labourers indicated that they are indeed part of a group of day labourers that support each other. These men rely on other day labourers for assistance with a number of aspects of their everyday lives. The kind of support is portrayed in Table 7. Table 7 represents the different areas of assistance in which Zimbabwean day labourers rely on one another as well as the absolute number and percentage of them who maintained that they experienced assistance in that particular area.

Table 7: The different areas of assistance provided in social groups for Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa, 2007

<b>Area of assistance</b>	<b>Number of day labourers belonging to group that supports one another</b>	<b>Percentage of day labourers belonging to group that supports one another</b>
Finding work	219	66
Transport/ lifts	35	11
Loans	83	25
Food	125	38
Shelter to sleep/ housing	35	11
Care when sick	35	11
Other	5	2

Source: Survey data

<sup>42</sup> W. Gonzo and I.E. Plattner, *Unemployment in an African country: a psychological perspective* (Windhoek, University of Namibia Press, 2003), p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> E. Worby, 'Address Unknown: The temporality of Displacement and the Ethics of Disconnection among Zimbabwean Migrants in Johannesburg', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36, 2 (June 2010), p. 417.

They mostly depend on each other to help them find work, but also to supply food and provide loans. Although to a lesser extent, they also turn to each other to help them find lifts, shelter and support when they are sick.

Perhaps surprisingly, these people standing on street corners have had far fewer negative encounters with the South African Police Service than would be expected, given their vulnerable legal and economic position in South African society. The survey suggests that more Zimbabwean day labourers indicated that they have been helped by police than indicated that they have been assaulted by police. However, almost one third of them were questioned by the police and/or asked about the legality of their presence in South Africa. It was not possible to reliably determine the outcome of this questioning during the interviews.

## **Conclusion**

This study on Zimbabwean day labourers revealed important demographic and economic features of this grouping in the broader day labour market. These migrants are mainly young Zimbabweans between the ages of 21 and 30 years of age who entered the country illegally. Their numbers in South Africa increased exponentially from 2004 onwards. The economic situation in their home country is the main push factor in explaining their migrating efforts.

The importance of sending remittances home was obvious from the results of the survey. Interestingly enough, 53 per cent of the day labourers who were married or living with a partner, send remittances four times a year to their dependants in Zimbabwe. This is twice as high as the corresponding percentage among single day labourers.

They are on average better qualified than the typical South African day labourer and have superior language proficiency in English as well. This would theoretically enable them to communicate better with prospective employers. This raised the question as to what role these human capital

attributes possibly play in determining the wage levels of Zimbabwean day labourers.

Analysing the income data reveals that the income they earn is significantly higher than that of the average South African day labourer. This would seem to indicate that as far as this informal labour market is concerned, Zimbabwean day labourers do not drag down wages in their destination country. The reasons for this can usefully form part of continued research to verify informal statements by employers concerning higher levels of productivity, commitment and reliability of Zimbabwean workers in comparison to their South African counterparts. Day labourers from Zimbabwe are seemingly better off than their countrymen who work as farm workers, given the current state of the literature on this aspect, which gives prominence to the exploitation experienced by illegal Zimbabwean migrants in other sectors of the economy.

Zimbabwean day labourers form an intriguing sub-sample of an informal economy activity that is seemingly becoming more and more common. This was the first study among them as a group. As a result it revealed several important facets of their daily lives that raise further questions. Pertinent among these is the issue of the determinants of the wage income of Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa. Appropriate regression analysis can shed light on the role played by human capital and other factors in explaining the higher level of Zimbabwean day labourers' wages in good weeks than that of their South African counterparts. This can be supplemented by qualitative research involving both day labourers and employers alike to investigate the pricing behaviour of employers in relation to these people.

It is important, furthermore, to spend research resources on an enquiry into the expenditure patterns of Zimbabwean day labourers to determine the extent of consumption investment in the host country as raised in the

literature.<sup>44</sup> The social reality of the daily existence of Zimbabwean day labourers requires further in-depth research. Issues such as the quality of life, subjective well-being and their coping mechanisms for the extended periods of dislocation from family and relatives back in Zimbabwe opens up a further agenda for further multidisciplinary research into this section of the informal economy.

Only through such a nuanced research agenda will it be possible to supply the information and micro data needed to inform policy options that serve the interests of both this vulnerable group and the citizens of their host country.

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<sup>44</sup> See for example M. Kiwanuka and T. Monson, '*Zimbabwean migration into Southern Africa: new trends and responses*', (November 2009), Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 1 - 92.

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