

Abstract

During the multifaceted crisis that has befallen Zimbabwe since 2000 the plight of the people has been manifest in a shrinking employment market, triple or four digit inflation, a sometime dearth of available commodities, rising child mortality rates and falling life expectancy - to the worst female life expectancy in the world - and a governance crisis experienced as political violence, uncertainty and cultural and social isolationism. Many popular and academic papers have bemoaned and discussed these symptoms of crisis.

The fieldwork from which this paper derives, in November to December 2006, was carried out in the context of the above, just after an exercise in currency renewal, where three zeros were removed, in a state suffering the excesses of state propaganda and fear. Some of the data is corrupted by this numeric confusion and fear induced unwillingness to respond to strangers' questions. However, the core of the dataset is sufficiently rigorous to suggest important validations and new observations which extend the analysis of our 2006 paper on Remittances in Zimbabwe (GPRG, Working Paper No. 45). This paper reaffirms the central importance of remittances to household wellbeing, reproduction and even survival. It provides new data on the expanding cross-border, non-pecuniary goods economy; data on a shrinking formal sector; an increasing unwillingness on the part of remitters to use commercial companies, banks or friends and relatives to transit remittances and thus a shrinking institutional base for the political economy of remittances. In other words, reliance on the personal physical carriage of money has grown as trust in other individuals and firms has shrunk during a period of deep and extended crisis. This serves to arrest any undue romanticism about the ability of an informal sector to emerge in direct compensation and competition to an ossified formal sector: all institutions are in crisis and the new informal remittance transfer systems (IRTS) are no exception. However, the resourcefulness of people in crisis continues to astound, despite these activities not resulting in concretised new institutions.

We conclude that a model of a political economy of dispossession can be drawn around our empirics to give both a metaphorical and deeper conceptual understanding of this distal, multi-nodal economy of international remittances, which is critical to the survival of Zimbabweans at the current time.

Keywords: migration, poverty, remittances, informalisation, Zimbabwe, political economy, dispossession.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would also like to acknowledge, with gratitude, the skills of the Field Researchers, Batsirai Mubaiwa and Fortune Nhengu; the SPSS data managers Fran Kern and Danief Neff. The support of the Economic and Social Research Council is gratefully acknowledged. The work was funded under the programme of the Global Poverty Research Group, grant (M571255001). Any inaccuracies of interpretation are our own.