

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **African diaspora experience of transnationalism, social networks and identity: The case of Zimbabwean social workers in the United Kingdom**

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**This paper examines transnationalism, social networks and identity as part of the experiences of the African Diaspora, in particular, Zimbabwean social workers in the UK. The above terms are closely associated with increasing international skilled migration from Africa in the global south, to the global North where there are better employment opportunities. This paper defines transnationalism, social networks, identity, the notion of 'home and belonging' and the creation of the Zimbabwean community in the UK. The above concepts are gaining increased currency and importance in contemporary migration studies. The paper also looks at the link between globalisation and transnational activities by Zimbabwean social workers, as part of the African diaspora community in the UK.**

**Key words:** African, diaspora, migrant, globalisation, transnationalism, social networks, identity

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper sets out to examine the concepts of transnationalism, social networks and identity as part of the experiences of the African Diaspora, in particular, Zimbabwean social workers in the UK. Transnationalism, social networks and identity are common themes associated with the African Diaspora. These terms also resonate with the increasing international skilled migration by African professionals from the global south

to the rich developed northern countries particularly the UK, Australia, Canada, United States and Ireland among others. This paper defines the concepts of transnationalism, social networks and identity as well as explores the notion of '*home and belonging*' and the creation of the Zimbabwean community in the UK. It is not surprising that transnationalism, transnational migrants, social networks and identity are concepts which

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are gaining increased currency and importance in contemporary migration studies, and hence the equally increasing global academic interest in them. The paper also looks at transnational activities by Zimbabwean social workers and the influence of globalisation on transnationalism and social networks among the African diaspora community in the UK (Page et al., 2009).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The materials and methods used in this paper were informed by secondary research: reviewing and analysing existing documents on the African Diaspora and the transnational experiences of Zimbabwean social workers living and working in the UK.

### Defining the concept of transnationalism

The term 'transnationalism' is a relatively new phenomenon that encapsulates the involvement of immigrants in the social, political, cultural and economic lives of their countries of their origin. This is made easier by modern communication technologies. Vertovec, 2001 and Waters (2003) contend that not all immigrant groups are affected by the same factors and that significant differences exist in the nature and extent of transnational activities they are involved in.

Portes (2007) argues that the better educated and more established immigrants are, the more likely they engage in transnational activities. The above appears to apply to Zimbabwean social workers in the UK, as they are part of the better-educated and increasingly more established African diaspora in the UK. Mbiba (2005) contend that the Zimbabwean diaspora community in the UK is dominated by highly educated and experienced females, who are mostly employed in the health care sector.

Glick Schiller et al. (1992) argue that transnationalism is an unavoidable product of the world economic system involved in the facilitation of the process of globalisation. Migrants are an important part of the above system, which is influenced by cultural flows that are part of the globalisation process where social relations are a crucial element. In addition to transnationalism, there are relevant concepts of social networks and identity, two concepts considered pivotal to the social and professional assimilation of Zimbabwean social workers into the wider English society. The above form part of the wider migration trajectories of Zimbabwean social workers as highlighted by Chogugudza (2018) and Tinarwo (2011). They defined in their own words what they believed was transnationalism and relate it to their social work experiences including knowledge and skills transfer processes. Their analysis of data regarding their research participants reflects very strongly, a connection between transnationalism, social networks, identity and the day-to-day living, work and choices as skilled overseas social work migrants in the UK. Most of their research participants broadly embraced the fact that transnationalism, social networks and identity were extremely critical to their migration experiences since their initial arrival in the UK up to this date.

Research into existing literature reveals that transnationalism is intrinsically linked to social or transnational networks. According to Gurak and Caces (1992: 154) these networks are both institutional and associational as well linked to family and kinship. They serve as 'networks of adaptive assistance to recent migrants ... insulating

migrants from the destination society' (Gurak and Caces, 1992: 154).

### Social networks

Poros (2011) describes Social Networks as a much broader and cumbersome phenomenon which encompasses in part, kinship networks. Social networks are the main dependent of any migrant's ability to choose their final destination as well as access employment, accommodation, business enterprise and even participating in the development of their country of origin. In source countries, their economic activity as regards cumulative brain drain and foreign remittances received by the family, friends, and other wider relationships are impacted by migrant networks.

The contacts that the migrants create in their country of origin and settlement and in other geographical spaces in general, define their migrant networks. These often comprise in transit contacts and those in third countries in which they have no residence claim. During their migration journeys, there are mixtures of individuals in the migrants' networks who potentially impact their migration trajectories. Additionally, Snel et al. (2020) argue that transnational social networks do encompass other critical actors constituting the so-called 'migration industry' such as civil society representatives, human traffickers, international organisations, law enforcement agents among others (Hernández-León, 2013).

Many in the African diaspora, including Zimbabwean social workers in the UK, believe that transnationalism and social networks are at the core of their migration trajectory and should be accepted as such. For some, social networks are a vital form of support for their social and professional integration in the UK without which their lives would be potentially dysfunctional. Transnationalism and social networks they believe have become vital parts of the migration stories of many among the African diaspora working and living in the UK. This is evidenced by the importance they place on cross border connections, social networks and significance of the feelings of home, alien identity and strong sense of belonging. Some migrants have called themselves inbetweeners, which means they float between home in Zimbabwe and their residence in the UK.

Massey et al. (1993) define migrant networks as "sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin". Key to the social network theory is the existence of interpersonal links and how they are linked to the provision of information and services. Potential migrants have a connection to networks through family relatives and friends as well as community networks. Most of them use social media as a way of reconnecting with friends and relatives in the sending country. Further, the use of social media has transformed the way the Zimbabwean social workers like other Diasporas in the UK communicate with their loved ones in Zimbabwe.

It is believed the use of social media strengthens the bonding of migrants and the way they share information. This may strengthen a migrant's ability to withstand the challenges of migration. This, therefore, controversially means that social media may lead to potential migrants becoming less dependent on the powerful traditional migrant networks for facilitating the migration trajectories and for integrating in the host country (IMI Working Papers Series 2012). Transnational migration networks play a critical role in determining migration decisions. Transnational linkages or connections have played a pivotal role in the migration trajectories

of many African Diaspora communities in the UK including Zimbabwean social workers. The dynamics of migrant cross-border engagements encompass a range of activities including but not limited to remittance sending, social networks, economic relationships, cultural practices, and political participation. In turn, the origin and the depth of the transnational ties that migrants maintain with both the sending and receiving communities can determine the creation and success of social groups like hometown associations (Andrade-Eekhoff, 2003).

Social networks provide guidance to migrants when exploring specific places and occupations. The local histories of migration, national conditions and communal socio-cultural traits often determine the nature of networks used by migrants and these often differ (Shah and Menon, 1999).

It can also be argued that the quality and scope of social networks, which principally determine whether they become a source of social capital, differ not only between the migrants and also among the migrants themselves depending on a number of factors including areas of interest and location of the networks. This is relevant to most migrants, including members of the African Diaspora whose networks are usually confined in certain parts of major cities in the UK.

Both concepts of transnationalism and social networks are linked to the notion of home and belonging, which affects most in the African diaspora, who claim to be linked to the African motherland through their *umbilical code*.

### The notion of 'home' and 'belonging'

The notion of home and belonging is of sentimental value to most African migrants in the UK including Zimbabwean social workers. The wider Zimbabwean diaspora have always connected with country of origin as well as maintained family networks abroad from the first day they set foot in the UK. They consider this link as indispensable and necessary in keeping themselves in touch with their people and culture, hence the emphasis on identity and belonging. There is also a common view that the more the Diasporas feel discriminated and prejudiced in the UK, the more their feelings of belonging to their homeland firm up. The notion of 'home' therefore becomes central to the concept of transnationalism. The transnational links are generally more frequent and stronger during the initial days of the Diasporas taking up post in their destination country, as they feel pressured and anxious to maintain contact with their relatives and families back home.

The "home is best mentality" has strongly kept the African migrants' connections between home in the diaspora and home as in country of origin, which is Zimbabwe in the case of Zimbabwean social workers. The lack of strong ties with the wider British society makes the African migrants feel more connected to their homeland. However, the same cannot be said of their children some of whom were born and grew up in the UK and are essentially second-generation Zimbabweans, with a comparatively weaker connection to the homeland than their parents.

The idea of 'home' is seen as where they were born and spent the greater part of their lives in, a place where their umbilical code is buried. However, the UK is perceived by Zimbabwean social workers as their temporary and yet important home, away from 'home' which they consider as two very distinct locations. The idea of one living in a country different from one's place of birth renders the concept of home for transnationals a contested area. It is not

uncommon for African migrants in Europe to consistently refer to their country of origin as home even when it is clear they have no intention of returning home in the near to long term future. The notion of home invokes some elements of sentimentalism for most African transnationals. Through transnationalism, many have continued to keep closely in touch with their families in Zimbabwe through a host of forums such as membership to churches' burial societies, village, provincial associations, alumni's and professional associations.

Salih (2002) contends that transnationalism has vindicated the notion that migrants are no longer subject to the entrapment between either assimilation or nostalgia and the 'myth of return'. Arguably, migrants can construct their lives across borders, participating in transnational activities which enable them to maintain membership in both their host country and their homeland. Many amongst the African diaspora often talk about how good things were back home when they were growing up compared to now. The above clearly shows how nostalgic they have become the longer they stay away from their homeland.

Many in the African diaspora including some Zimbabwean social workers in the UK have established ties with Universities and Colleges in their home country where they are involved in charitable and alumni activities. Communication is usually via Zoom, Microsoft Teams Cisco Webex, and Skype and in person where possible, to keep themselves abreast with what is happening in Zimbabwe.

### THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

Identity is closely linked to transnationalism and social networks in the wider migration process. The psychologist Erickson first brought the term "identity" to its initial prominence (Erikson, 1968). While Erikson perceives the concept of identity as associated with personhood with sameness, other scholars stress the peculiarity of the characteristics which differentiate a person from others or humankind in general (Baumeister, 1986; Brewer, 1991, 1993; Rouse, 1995). Barth (1969) sees identity through the lens of boundaries. Boundaries often have clearly defined psychological, cultural, social or political connotations and include some people as members of a group to the exclusion of others. This perspective contends that social or cultural identity cannot be explained through fixed categories or unchanging phenotypical practices. Barth (1969) argues that identity is dynamic in its characteristics, practices, symbols and traditions and can change due to its interaction with the physical, social, cultural, economic and political environment. Barth (1969) emphasises more on the existence of boundaries between the own group and other groups as opposed to the characteristics of identity.

Identity is seen as critical part of the transnational behaviour of migrants. Vertovec (2001) argues that the transnational networks by and large are premised on the perception that the migrants share common identity,

usually associated with country of origin and other traits associated with it. The communication or resource exchange patterns along with participation in socio-cultural and political activities of often characterise the transnational networks of migrants.

Through transnationalism, the Zimbabwean social workers in the UK perceive of distance between their homeland and host country as an obstruction to their connectedness to their families and friends abroad. Those who still maintain ties with their close families abroad are probably the most vocal in defining their transnational activities and in terms of their psychological proximity to their homeland. The sense of belonging and identity among Zimbabwean social workers in the UK is a critical feature of their lives in the diaspora. This is often bolstered by their experiences of 'prejudices and discrimination' from their service users, colleagues and other professionals. The phenomenon of Identity in the diaspora is often controversial and contested. There is the confusion of dual identities on the part of migrants. There are also generational differences with regards to the sentimentality attached to the issue of dual identities. In essence, the whole issue of identity and belonging is very emotive among the African diaspora in UK.

For many in the Zimbabwean diaspora in the UK, they display a strong sense of identity and loss and need for connectedness with their mother country. Some still entertain the idea of returning to Zimbabwe and relive the life they had before moving to the UK. The distance between home and the host country creates a sense of anxiety and all sorts of nostalgia on the part of the Zimbabwean Diasporas. According to Triandafyllidou (2009), the above largely demonstrates that distance and separation from home as well as difference tend to mould and reinforce the sense of identity in immigrants.

The issue of identity is also linked to the process of integration or assimilation. Tinarwo (2011) argues that more subtle forms of integration are being used including the process of taking and passing the citizenship test before being granted British citizenship. In view of the aforementioned, it is therefore argued that *identity negotiation* is a continuous process for Zimbabwean social workers in the UK even if they decide to return to Zimbabwe on a permanent basis, albeit their homeland being politically and economically harsh to live in currently.

Identity is a crucial factor in the migration experiences of the African diaspora in the UK; it affects them at an individual personal level and at an institutional or professional level. For Zimbabwean social workers, there is a perception that they are Zimbabwean first and identify with everyone and everything Zimbabwean and second, they consider themselves as professionals, from

a foreign country who are essentially perceived as overseas workers with very little cultural links with their host society. They also identify themselves as a sub-ethnic group having a unique *skill set* and knowledge transferrable to the UK through globalisation or other means. Therefore, for them, the relationship between transnationalism, social networks and identity, and globalisation is paramount.

Further, transnationalism and social networks without paying attention to the issue of identity are irrelevant, as identity is primarily at the nucleus of the migration debate and can be a very emotive or sensitive issue among the African migrants.

## CREATION OF ZIMBABWE IN AN ENGLISH SETTING

There is evidence to suggest a growing Zimbabwean diaspora community in major urban parts of England which social workers are an important part of, and this provides them with much needed social networks and identity. This, however, needs further exploration as it is not known how many people of Zimbabwean origin were working and living in the UK. The memories associated with their connection with home are an important feature of the lives of many Zimbabweans living in the English diaspora. The growing number of Zimbabwean immigrants in the UK is creating a basis for a gradually developing Zimbabwean community in the country. Portes et al. (1999) divides transnational activities into broader categories of economic, political and socio-cultural as will be discussed in the study.

### Transnational activities

Bloch (2008) contends that Zimbabweans living in the UK keep consistent transnational ties of political, economic and cultural nature with those in the country of origin. Many of them participate in transnational networks of various forms. Bloch (2008), states that more research needs to be done to explore the specific and wider transnational activities of Zimbabweans based in the UK, including Zimbabwean social workers. However, many have retained some links with the home country, remotely, and effectively live dual lives.

### Economic activities

Transnational economic activities form part of the lives of most Zimbabweans in the UK. Zimbabwe, a country that has endured a prolonged economic decline for more than

two decades has been supported largely by expatriates and economic refugees across the globe including England. Zimbabweans in the diaspora including those living and working in the UK, have continued to support their families back home through remittances, which are sent through Western Union, World Remit and Money Gram.

Bloch (2008) reports that most Zimbabweans send remittances to Zimbabwe in order to alleviate the financial burden of sending school children to school and looking after their welfare in a country where the standards of living have been on a free fall in recent years. The deteriorating economy and social conditions in Zimbabwe have largely impacted on the members of the Zimbabwean diaspora in the UK who suffer from the increased pressure of maintaining their families in a faltering economy. There is a plethora of debates around the use of remittances abroad and how these are used by migrants in shaping their relationship with relatives and sometimes the state in terms of investments and contributing to the local economy. The Zimbabwean diaspora like African other migrants elsewhere in the developed world is connected in a strong way to their homeland and host country. According to Basch et al. (1994) economic remittances are closely associated with the sustenance of the social relations between the migrants and their families in their homeland. The transfer of these remittances has been transformed in terms of speed and effectiveness by the recent developments in communications technologies.

Vertovec (2003) also alludes to the easy access to cheap phone cards, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Telegram as having made communicating with families abroad much easier for the wider migrant populations including the Zimbabwean diaspora in the UK. These communication methods are used to connect with loved ones back home when sending remittances or discussing family issues among other functions hence contributing to transnationalism. There is no strong evidence linking Zimbabwean professionals using remittances to efforts to initiate investment and economic development in their country of origin. Bloch (2008) contends that the remittances to Zimbabwe by the majority of diasporans tend to be more on a micro level than macro level. In essence, their contribution appears to be insignificant to the development of the local economy in Zimbabwe.

Newlands and Patrick (2004) argue that the practice of sending economic remittances to family members abroad has the likely effect of reducing the rate of poverty in the interim while investing in the country of origin will be more likely to reduce poverty in the long run and for more people.

### **Socio-cultural activities**

Chogugudza (2018) states that a sizeable number of Zimbabwean social workers in the UK were members of various Zimbabwean Diaspora organisations based in UK which have some affiliation with Zimbabwe. These include AFM and ZAOGA churches, University of Zimbabwe Alumni, Local Development Associations and Zimbabwean linked political organisations including the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) among others. Some attend cultural activities such as the annual Zimfest celebrations and visiting musical outfits which provide them the opportunities to link with their cultural roots in a foreign country. For some, the above help them to maintain socio-cultural relevance away from 'home'.

Those who can travel to Zimbabwe choose to do so at certain periods or times every year. The very idea of being able to celebrate important functions with the rest of their families back home instils a strong sense of belonging in them. However, COVID19 restrictions have impacted on travelling arrangements for many would be transnationals. At the heart of transnationalism is the cultural dimension whose power forces the Zimbabwean diasporas to reconnect with their traditions and customs back home. Culture is perceived to be mobile and transient and can be defined in the context within which it is practised or observed.

The increasing migration of Zimbabweans to the UK has also corresponded with an increase the diaspora media. According to Mano and Willems (2008) the emerging media has created a platform for interaction between the diaspora and the country of origin. The emerging media facilitate the conveyance of information and transnational ties between the diaspora and the country of origin. The diaspora media becomes an alternative voice for the often-underreported African diasporic activities in the UK.

### **Political activities**

Most Zimbabweans in the diaspora including Zimbabwean social workers are engaged in transnational activities in a variety of ways but there is little evidence to suggest many are formally involved in transnational political activities in a significant way. Zimbabweans in the UK define transnational diaspora politics in a few different ways. Some see diaspora politics as an extension of opposition politics dominated by MDC at home in Zimbabwe and some are involved as a way of securing immigration status under the banner of political asylum. For some, it is the only way of expressing their political sentiments over the political situation in

Zimbabwe under the banner of free speech in the UK. Pasura (2010a) sees a very close link between lack of immigration status and transnational politics in respect of many Zimbabweans in the UK. Those who obtained British citizenship and permanent residency were too busy with their professional work activities and have little desire for involvement in political activities. The continued power struggles and disintegration of the MDC political formations has affected people's interests in transnational politics in Zimbabwe. They believe, a fractious opposition has no chance of impacting positive change in the country hence the declining political interests among the Zimbabwean diaspora communities. For those interested and involved in politics at home, there are restrictions as to what they can do. There is also very little appetite in joining activities of the ruling Zanu (PF) party for reasons in that are in the public domain. Being active in Zanu (PF) politics in the UK is perceived by many as nothing but a farrago of absurdity.

### **Role of globalisation**

The role of globalisation in shaping modern migration cannot be underestimated. Quirke et al. (2009) contend that the advent of globalisation characterised by advances in the fields of communication and transport has led to the increase in efficient links and ties between migrants and their families and friends in their countries of origin. The improvement of ties and links between those in the diaspora and in the home country has been seen by scholars of International migration studies as transformative to the cultures, values and ways of life of migrants. African migrants like other international migrants have been equally impacted by globalisation in their transnational character and the trend continues.

Globalisation has been a major influence in the conduct of the transnational activities of many among the African diaspora in the UK and as part of their wider migration process. Inda and Rosaldo (2002) argue that although there is a close link between globalisation and transnationalism, transnationalism is the term which is mostly used when it comes to describing transnational activities involving migrants moving across international frontiers of one or more countries. However, some theorists describe the relationship between the above two terms in different ways. There is no denying the fact that globalisation brought with it faster technology and associated social media which largely affects both transnationalism and networks.

El-Ojeili and Hayden (2006) argue that the concept of globalisation can be best understood through the following four concepts which are seen as key and these

are stretched social relations, intensification of flows, increasing interpenetration and global infrastructures. These are essentially considered as the underlying formal and informal institutional arrangements required for globalized networks to operate.

Globalisation in essence, is seen as a facilitator for migration and through rapid advances in communications and information technology, rise in the use of social media and the decline in travel costs, globalisation has enabled many African migrants to "keep in contact" with their homelands and to establish lasting links with transnational networks, which are seen as crucial for their survival away from home.

IOM (2010) states that globalisation has in essence influenced the transnational perspective on migration. Globalisation forces have improved the connectivity of migrants to two or more realities across national borders. They believe globalisation has through its multiple characteristics and dynamism strengthened the connections of migrants to places abroad. It is also crucial to highlight the effects of globalisation on the concepts of transnationalism, social networks and Identity and this also affects Zimbabwean social workers living and working in the UK whose migration journeys were heavily influenced by political, economic and technological globalisation. Globalisation continues to impact on the migration trajectories and transnational character of the African diaspora in general long after they have settled in their host country.

Globalisation is very much linked to the migration of African professionals from the continent to the UK. These African professionals include social workers recruited from Zimbabwe. Globalisation has both facilitated the migration process from Africa to the UK and play a central role in their transnational activities using various internet technologies. The use of social media as a form of technological globalisation has inevitably aided the Zimbabwean social workers in maintaining ties with their homeland as transnationals living and working in the UK.

### **Conclusion**

Whilst the issues of transnationalism, identity and social networks appear to be mostly associated with the mainstream migration and social capital studies, it is important to state that all forms of migration, including that of skilled professionals and unskilled labourers, are inevitably affected by the above concepts. There is not much research available on transnationalism, social networks, identity and globalisation in relation to social worker migration, especially from Zimbabwe, an area that requires further exploration. Transnationalism, identity,

and social networks are relevant and significant facets of the migration journeys to the UK experienced by Zimbabwean social workers among the African diaspora. The above concepts continue to influence African migration to the UK, before and after arriving in the destination country. Globalisation also features prominently in the current debates of transnationalism, identity and social networks among the African diaspora in the UK. The issue of home and sense of belonging is also an important sentimental issue for many in the African diaspora. Although there is widely accepted research on transnational social networks of the African Diaspora in general, not much is known regarding the synergies between transitional social networks and the unique individual migration stories, right from the inception of their journeys to the stage of settlement in their final destination countries. This according to several immigration theorists is mainly due to the absence of longitudinal data on migrants from the time they leave their country of origin throughout their migration journey up to the settlement period. Transnationalism, identities and social networks regarding the African diaspora in general is an important area of study, which continues to attract increasing academic and research interest. Transnationalism by the African diaspora was relevant in the last few decades, is relevant today and will continue to be relevant in the future. Transnationalism is therefore considered a significant factor in the process of global migration management. In essence, the positive and negative transnational practices help to inform contemporary research and academic discourse on African migration trends in the West.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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