

## **BRAIN DRAIN: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Sub-Sahara Africa region is characterized by high brain drain, mostly due to harsh socio-economic and political conditions. One central question that has caused a lot of controversy in Zimbabwe has been whether brain drain has positive or negative impact on sustainable development. One divergent school of thought examines brain drain from the perspective of the highly detrimental effects arising from acute shortage of manpower, thereby weakening capacity of development. On the other hand, representatives of the other convergence school of thought argue that the problem of brain drain in Zimbabwe is over dramatized and is less critical than it is usually portrayed. It is within such a controversial and sensitive framework that this research was carried out. The research utilized both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in which structured interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires were the main data collection instruments. The research noted that there is an overall tendency for migration rates in Zimbabwe to be higher for highly educated individuals. The research revealed that brain drain represents a major development constrain both in terms of development opportunities and lost investment and it drains sending nations of their human capital that took enormous resources to nurture and produce. Thus brain drain is an international transfer of resources in the form of human capital that is not recorded in an official balance of payment statistics and it represents major challenges in the education sector in Zimbabwe

**Keywords:** Brain drain, brain circulation, Diaspora, Human capital, Labor, Zimbabwe

### **INTRODUCTION**

Brain drain has been a subject of much debate and research over the few decades. There is compelling evidence that brain drain possesses both positive and negative ramifications on developing economies. The Institute of People Management in Zimbabwe (IPMZ) Annual Report (2007) acknowledges that in a country that is characterized by political and economic discords and upheavals, brain drain becomes inevitable. Unless measures are put in place to nib the problem in the bud, sustainable development will remain intangible.

Since 2000, Zimbabwe has been experiencing an economic down turn and political unrest, hence the increase in emigration by the majority of the human capital to neighboring countries and abroad in search of better economic fortunes. Zimbabwe has lost over one million (Sunday Mail, 2010b) of its highly skilled workers, who occupied a wide spectrum of jobs in the health and education sectors to neighboring countries and abroad. Zimbabwe has lost its intellectual capital to almost every

corner of the globe at a time when it is unable to extricate itself from worsening shortage of foreign currency, food, fuel, unemployment, inflation and poverty. Even after the formation of the inclusive government in 2009, brain drain levels have remained too high especially in health and education sectors as evidenced by United States AID and United Nations, which were reported to be on a massive drive to recruit lecturers, teachers, doctors, engineers and nurses among other professionals from Zimbabwe to Lesotho and other countries in the region to resuscitate their economies (Sunday Mail, 2010a).

Between 2002 and 2008 Zimbabwe's economy was characterized by high inflation, shortage of basic commodities and drastic monetary policy changes, (The Mirror, 2008). The unpredictable monetary policies which consequently led to economic downturn and brain drain in the education and health sectors throughout the country became inevitable. Employees from other sectors of the economy have also not been spared by the ravaging economic upheavals in the country. Professionals in all sectors of the economy are still migrating to neighboring countries such as Lesotho, Botswana and South Africa in spite of the cosmetic political and economic changes brought about by the inclusive government, (Sunday Mail, 2010 a).

The country's failure to extract benefits from brain drain has resulted in the castigation of the international community by government officials for crippling the Zimbabwean economy by employing its highly skilled manpower. For instance the Zimbabwean government was quoted in the Sunday Mail castigating the move made by countries in the region for intending to employ Zimbabwean lecturers, teachers, nurses and doctors. The movement of labor was described as having disastrous consequences in the education and health sectors, which are pillars of the economy. The government argues that brain drain does not provide sufficient remittances to compensate for human capital losses but rather contributes to political instability and economic distortions.

In relation to this subject (Dessler, 2003, Nabwowe, 2007) observed that brain drain has always been viewed in a negative way often castigating highly skilled professionals for abandoning their country in search of greener pastures in developed countries. However, rather than feeling helpless and hopeless and continuing to complain about the international community and poor leadership, Zimbabwe must seek innovative ways to harness and leverage their immense but largely untapped and underutilized human capital to implement sustainable economic development and capacity building activities.

The benefits and profits, which the country is entitled to from those who have been trained at higher learning institutions, have remained invisible because of brain drain. The entire developed world's effort to increase aid to Zimbabwe may not matter if the local personnel required for developmental programmes are absent. The inconclusive debate on whether brain drain benefits sending countries has stimulated the carrying out of this research.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Brain drain has undermined efforts in the sustainable delivery of public services in Zimbabwe. Brain drain has militated against government's ability to provide adequate and competitive services since it has resulted in the reduction of the revenue base through decreases in incomes and corporate taxes as well as other forms of tax collections. This has inevitably affected, among other things, government's allocations for education and health. The Zimbabwean government has lost significant

revenue through brain drain, which could have been used in upgrading infrastructure and technology in schools, hospitals and other vital public services. The major implication of brain drain on the Zimbabwean economy lies in the fact that every year there remains fewer people to deliver key public services, drive economic growth, and articulate calls for greater democracy and development. The gradient and outflow of brain drain in favor of the region should be a major source of concern to the Zimbabwean government. Unless these disastrous brain drain trends are soon minimized, the economic growth will be greatly imperiled.

## **JUSTIFICATION**

The research gathered information on the impact of brain drain on sustainable in Zimbabwe. This information is important to stakeholders in the economy. The stakeholders include non-governmental organizations, government and quasi-government institutions such as district councils. The research will assist these stakeholders to see the impact of brain drain on service delivery and it will highlight entry points for various stakeholders in order to solve the problems brought by brain drain.

## **AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

To assess the impact of brain drain on sustainable development in Zimbabwe

### **Specific Objectives**

- To identify and document the level of brain drain in Zimbabwe
- To assess the impact of brain drain on sustainable development
- To generate recommendations on how the government can harness resources from emigrants to promote sustainable economic development

### **Research Methodology**

The study used both qualitative and quantitative research designs. The questionnaire was the only quantitative data collection instrument used and in the qualitative design, a number of methods were used which included focus group discussions and semi structured interviews with key stakeholders such as principal directors in government ministries, central statistics office and the immigration department. The study was divided into phases beginning with a pre-study survey and a final stage of intensive field study. Informants were selected using purposive sampling.

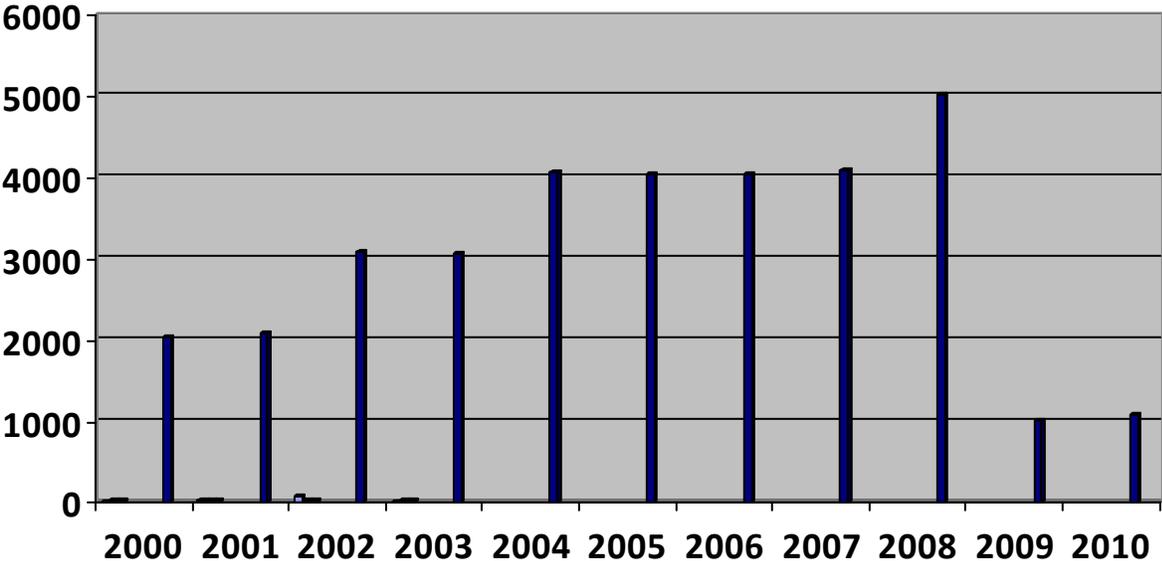
## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **The Level of Brain Drain in Zimbabwe**

The research indicated that emigration rate for the period 2000-2005 averaged around 20.2 percent. It is quite clear that the political instability generated by electoral fraud gave greater impetus to the emigration process. Prior to 2000 emigration

levels averaged slightly below 8 percent (Ricardo, 2003). However thereafter, emigration levels soared to more than 5,000 annually before falling to slightly above 1,000 after the formation of the Government of National Unity in 2009 (Central Statistics Office,2004) . This shows that people had great expectations, which were not delivered by the Inclusive government and the rate of emigration started to increase after year 2010. The most popular destinations were South Africa, United Kingdom, Botswana and Namibia. Figure 1, illustrates the number of people who migrated to countries in the region. The totals do not reflect the number of people who migrated to countries outside the region.

**Fig 1. The number of emigrants-2000 -2005**



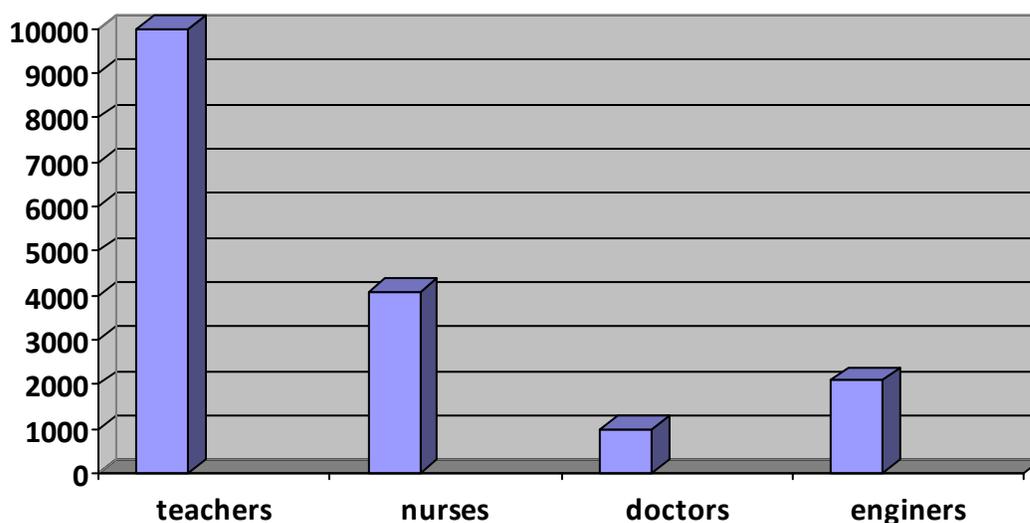
Source: Central Statistic Office, 2012.

The research shows an alarming number of both skilled and unskilled manpower who have immigrated to other countries. It can therefore be deduced that there is an alarmingly huge number of people who have left the country due to various reasons. The emigration of skilled manpower in the health and education sectors has contributed to poor service delivery. This situation has resulted in the increase of Zimbabweans seeking basic services in neighboring countries at a higher cost. Those who could not afford resorted to the indigenous knowledge systems. In the education sector brain drain resulted in dire shortage of science teachers and the government tried to solve the problem by employing untrained teachers. This resulted in the decline of service delivery in most schools. In the health sector the impacts were disastrous because it resulted in deaths which could have been avoided. The research revealed that the more people emigrate, the greater the impact on sustainable development

The research also revealed that of the total emigrants, about 14 percent were in the highly skilled category. These emigrants fall under medical personnel, accountants, architects, nurses, engineers and teachers. The research noted that on average, 1 780 highly skilled workers emigrated every year since 2000. The emigration of highly skilled labor force has also resulted in

unreasonable increase of service fees to an extent that most service charges went beyond the reach of most ordinary citizens. The research also revealed that most people who emigrated were economically active citizens; hence this deprived the nation of its valuable labor force. The Ministry of education was greatly affected by exodus of teachers to neighboring countries. The research revealed that inflation led to migration of teachers to other countries in the region to search for alternative employment. Teachers who migrated to neighboring countries exceeded 9 500 every year (Zimbabwe Teachers Association, 2009). The health sector was also affected by the migration of approximately over 4000 nurses every year. Lack of adequate government funding to various government ministries in the health sector contributed to the mass exodus of professional. The other cited reason was that most nurses were exposed to various diseases since government could not afford to supply protective clothing. The following table summarizes the number of professionals who migrated.

Table. 2: The number of professionals who migrated every year



Source: Central Statistics

The research also inferred into the reasons which caused skilled and non-skilled labor force to immigrate to neighboring countries. The research revealed that as pressures of poverty, population growth and environmental degradation mount, they produce a volatile cocktail of insecurity. Prominently emerging for the reasons given for those that are in the Diaspora was the search for greener pastures which accounted for 64.4%. Besides the search for greener pastures 17.8% simply left the country because they could not get any jobs locally. Other reasons given included staff development, political and economic instability. The reasons given for leaving the country are therefore important if Zimbabwe is to try and take advantage of the Diasporas. Since a significant number left the country in order to secure a job, then it can be concluded that Zimbabwe can take advantage of such a group by first making it possible for the environment to attract them back by creating employment opportunities or even encouraging investment.

## **Impacts of brain drain on sustainable development**

The research revealed that brain drain has presented a major development constrain in terms of development opportunities and lost investment and it has drained the country of its human capital that took enormous resources to nurture and produce. The government has lost critical human capital in which it has invested resources through education and specialized training and for which it is not compensated by other nations in the region. The government has suffered a net loss because it funds the education and training of professionals who, precisely at the time they start to produce, decide to migrate. Zimbabwe's education budget has become nothing but supplement to the education budgets for countries in the region.

Furthermore respondents noted that remittances have been insufficient to compensate for human capital losses. In fact remittances have increased dependency, contribute to political instability, worsening economic distortions and hinder development because remittances are unpredictable and undependable. Remittances have also encouraged the consumption of goods with high import content. The research revealed that remittances have failed to enhance development because they are not spent on long term investment but mostly on unproductive and consumptive purposes such as debt repayment, land purchase, conspicuous consumption or simply saved as insurance and old age pension funds.

The research further revealed that human capital is more valuable than financial capital because it is human capital that can be converted into wealth. One respondent noted that money alone cannot eliminate poverty in Zimbabwe, because one billion dollars is a number with no intrinsic value. Real wealth cannot be measured by money. One respondent responded by noting that 'money cannot teach your children but teachers can and money cannot cure the sick, but doctors can'.

Brain drain has affected both public and private consumption and investment spending. It has placed strain on government's ability to provide public services. Brain drain has significantly reduced the revenue base through decreases in incomes and corporate taxes. This has inevitably affected government's allocation for education, health and law and order. Thus, brain drain has resulted in the reduction of the quality of public services. Private investment and consumption spending has also declined as some migrants have taken along their savings and investment as they left the country

Contrary to other views that brain drain does not lead to a loss in economic welfare of the home country, mainly because there are other workers who can replace the emigrants quite easily, the Zimbabwe situation has been because surplus pool of labor has not been able to replace the highly skilled workers who have left. This has occurred in the highly skilled professions in the areas of health, education and other specialized services. It has been noted that efficiency of those who replace the emigrants has been low. In some sectors such as engineering, some limited levels of economic development have been achieved, but at a higher cost.

High levels of emigration also affected the already weak investment environment. It is estimated that between 1999 and 2001, Zimbabwean citizen emigrating withdrew around US\$341 million dollars, which was part of their savings accumulated over years. This did not account for other forms of personal savings which individuals or families have withdrawn from the financial system. It is paramount to note that investment, and economic growth, would have been much higher if these savings had remained in the economy.

The government of Zimbabwe incurred gigantic costs in human capital development, mainly owing to heavily subsidized primary and tertiary education through its national policy. Zimbabwe suffered a net loss because it funded the education and training of professionals who precisely at the moment they start their professional programmes, decide to emigrate, (Herald, 2010). Conversely the receiving countries in the region had obtained qualified workers without having to bear the costs of training thereby making a net profit. Zimbabwe's education budget has therefore become nothing but a supplement to the education budgets for the receiving countries.

Parthasrathi (2004) leveled a critic to brain drain when he remarked that the possibility of emigration and expectations of higher incomes abroad will increase initiatives for developing countries to invest in their human capital does not hold true. In Zimbabwe reverse flows seem to be fairly smaller than the initial outward flows and the latter has been destructive, as what happened in Ghana with the wholesale emigration of doctors and nurses, (Nabwowe, 2007).

Harvey (2008) acknowledges the contribution of brain circulation but he however raises concerns as to the amounts of remittances made as this does not tally with costs incurred. In his own words he says, "Although highly developed countries benefit from immigration of highly skilled personnel, evidence of reverse benefits flowing back to source nations is far from convincing. While for many developing countries, the money sent home by all migrants can be large, there are good grounds for believing that the amount sent by highly skilled migrants in particular are fairly modest. The remittances fail to enhance development because they are not spent on investment goods but mostly spent on unproductive purposes that is housing, land purchase, transport, and repayment of debt or wasted on conspicuous consumption. In the case of Zimbabwe, the money sent home was meager except that because of the skewed nature of the exchange rate the recipients could exchange the money on the "black market". Once exchanged to local currency as little as US\$10 could translate into millions thereby resulting in a misconception that remittance was significant. However, with the formation of the Government of National Unity the actual remittances can be evaluated against local expenditure needs and whether the flow of remittances is large enough to offset the loss incurred is a lingering development question.

Brain drain has failed to address the emigrants' social detachments. The Diaspora has and is playing havoc with people's lives, especially children. Zimbabwe is in real danger of creating a society that has no morals if parents and children continue to stay apart, (Sunday Mail 2010b). Emigrants have been detached from their beloved families and friends, which is contrary to the African culture of inclusivity. Harvey et-al (2009) argue that dual career families are more resistant to undertaking expatriate assignments primarily due to difficulties associated with the trailing spouse not being able to find a job overseas. In an African set up a man is expected to be with his family to provide guidance and socialize his children in a manner that best suits the culture, values, and norms of society, (Haralambos & Hainborn 1999). When one is in the Diaspora, performing the above mentioned roles becomes very difficult if not impossible. To some extent technology makes an attempt to provide partial solutions to this problem through modern modes of communication, but the physical contact aspect remains unfulfilled.

While it has been easy to identify ways in which brain drain hurt economic development, the reason that it may be positive were not so obvious Nabwowe (2007) observed that more than half of the Africans who immigrate to developed countries

actually return home with innovative initiatives. There are Zimbabwean emigrants who have managed to acquire skills, tactics and experiences in their fields of expertise. The experiences gained by people working abroad are valuable resources to the sending country (Gomez-Mejia, 1998; Tripathi, 2004). This can only be if the country has the tactical pedigree to tap into these resources to the benefit of the nation. However the Zimbabwean government has not fully utilize such opportunities

The other benefit that accrues from brain drain is the social contacts that are gained by the emigrants, which are a valuable resource to development (Russel & Bernadin 1996, Marchington and Wilkson 2004, Nabwone, 2007). In many developing economies social contacts have over the years been proved to be a vital route to solicit for economic and political support from economic powerhouses such as USA, China and Britain. The Diaspora – African’s geographical locations such as in Washington DC, New York and European Union capitals make them access connections to global political, policy and financial power centers. However, social networks and partnerships have not yielded positive results at the national level because the country is under economic sanctions for the alleged violation of human rights.

Diaspora Africans in Western countries are particularly well-positioned to make substantial contributions in areas of economic development such as capacity building, and technical assistance in their respective areas of expertise and interest (Isimbababi, 2004). Emigrants can contribute immensely to developing capacity in their countries of origin through activities such as setting up facilities and entrepreneurship. Many Diaspora African groups and individuals have successfully implemented several useful projects at local communities, Sub-National, national and continental levels, (The Mirror, 2008). For instance Strive Masiyiwa’s Econet Wireless International took control of the Burundi operation by buying out Regional Investment Group PME African Infrastructure Opportunities for a US \$15 million transaction, (The Herald, 2010). Remittances of funds from Diaspora Africans have had major economic impacts in their homelands. In a research carried out by Dawson (2007) in Canada it was revealed that brain circulation enhances prospects for economic development through remittances and the engagement of Diaspora communities. Zimbabwe just like Canada can also benefit from human capital that has been posted all over the world. A sign of such profits have been reported by <http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/> (2009) where Econet Wireless International (EWI), a major mobile phone operator owned by a self exiled Zimbabwean entrepreneur Strive Masiyiwa, invested US \$94 million into Zimbabwe to expand its network. The major problem that was encountered in Zimbabwe was that most potential investors were specified by the government for externalizing foreign currency. The specifications militated against meaningful investment in Zimbabwe.

The study also concurred with Nabwowe (2007)’s observation that migrants who work abroad sometimes send part of their income to their families in the home country. Migration decisions are after all, part of many families’ strategies to raise income, obtain funds to invest in new activities and insure against income and production risks. In 2008 when the Zimbabwean inflation had hit unprecedented levels and starvation was at its peak, most families survived through the support they received from their relatives and friends working abroad, for they sent foodstuffs and hard currency to buy basic commodities, (Sunday Mail, 2010 a). People working in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia regularly remitted financial and non-financial resources to support their families, (Chronicle, 2008). Banks such as Kingdom Bank of Zimbabwe (Ltd), Standard Chartered Bank and Stanbic facilitated the flow of money from the Diaspora to Zimbabwe through their Western

Union and Money Gram programmes, (The Independent 2008). However most of the resources were used for consumptive purposes.

Although there are fatigues of the concept of brain drain it however remains a very vital concept, which Zimbabwe can embrace to its benefit. It is inevitable to restrict labor migration; hence the country ought to explore alternative ways to benefit from the much celebrated concept of brain drain in order to stimulate socio-economic development.

## **RECOMMEDATIONS**

Countries such as Taiwan, China and India have profited enormously from brain drain. Zimbabwe can as well benefit from brain circulation if proper and sound strategies are enforced. Zimbabwe is yet to fully tap and effectively utilize the financial, intellectual and other resources of accomplished Zimbabweans, to foster its progress, particularly in leadership, governance, capacity building and development of a strong private sector orientation.

Most Zimbabweans want to contribute to African progress, for a variety of reasons. However, only a small fraction is actively involved in high impact initiatives, because the government has not seriously engaged them with the view to persuade them to return home. Thus, Diasporas collective impact in Zimbabwe's development has remained far short of what was potentially achievable if their resources were more effectively harnessed and leveraged. The government should create an environment which attracts those in the Diaspora to return home. Tax rates and other economic policies may need to be revised.

The government of Zimbabwe should recognize the advantage of people in the Diaspora. Nabwowe (2007) reiterated that governments should support Diasporas for they make significant contribution towards empowering communities back home. The government of Zimbabwe through sister countries' embassies, should join hands with professional societies in the USA, Canada, UK and in the Southern region to actively try and get people in the Diaspora to return home and also contribute to the resuscitation of the economy. The government should harness brain drain in a more productive manner and avoid hate language that is masqueraded by government-controlled newspapers in Zimbabwe. The government should put in place policies, which motivate and attract returning emigrants to fill key roles in the public and private sectors.

In an effort to harness brain drain the Zimbabwean government needs to swiftly put its political house in order so as to address the country's economic problems. Both the public and private sectors should offer regionally or even globally comparable working conditions. Because home is best, a sizeable number of Zimbabweans returned home with high expectations immediately after the formation of the GNU, (The Herald, 2009). This positive development was however short-lived as the working conditions were still far below what neighboring countries were offering. For example, the Lesotho government offers Zimbabwean doctors salaries ranging from US\$1729 to US\$2729 compared to US\$300, which the government of Zimbabwe is giving to its doctors, (Sunday Mail, 2010a).

Immigration policies can be a ticket for scientific talent to re-circulate among countries (Parthasarathi, 2004). Jagdish Bhagwati (1970) suggests that the losses from the beneficiaries of migration incurred by developing countries should be

offset to some degree by the transfer of resources. Zimbabwe can levy a tax on companies in countries that employ their highly skilled labor. The money can be used to set up companies or help in developing more human capital in the country. This could in the long run accelerate the process of filling the employment gaps that will have been created by emigration and in turn influence development in the country. Most foreign graduate students from developing countries fear that after their return they will be cut off from knowledge exchange because of administrative hassles and restrictions on visa applications, (Harvey, 2008). The Zimbabwean government needs to engage its European and United States counterparts to loosen the administration hassles of applying for visas. Notably, the Zimbabwean government has currently successfully negotiated for the removal of visa requirement for one to visit South Africa, which has become home to many Zimbabweans, (Herald, 2008).

Given the unfavorable economic climates and poor professional working conditions that persist in Zimbabwe resulting in high economic and professional risks involved, it becomes unrealistic to expect emigrants to relocate permanently to Zimbabwe soon. The government may need to consider putting in place realistic brain circulation initiatives that do not involve permanent return. For example, universities in the country may invite experts working abroad to present papers to various stakeholders or encourage them to invest back home or provide advocacy, research and product development services.

The government of Zimbabwe needs to create an environment where its most capable citizens including, teachers and health care workers, see a long-term future in the country. The formation of the inclusive government brought about hope to Zimbabwean nationals abroad but the discord that continues to characterize it, makes the once accumulated hope evaporate, (The Mirror 2009). Political leaders with the assistance of different stakeholders need to create economic and political environments that can boost investor confidence. The Diasporas have some financial and material resources, which they can invest back home if the environment improves.

Rather than concentrating on the effects of brain drain of the highly skilled labor force, Zimbabwe can also concern itself with the semi-skilled labor force, which is willing to work hard and improve their work skills. Many countries have taken advantage of this group whom they exploit to the benefit of their development by paying low wages and salaries. Some large companies are no longer manufacturing their products in their countries of origin, but where there is a source of cheap labor and where the political and economic conditions are set right. Besides such countries as China, Malaysia and Taiwan, Zimbabwe can be an alternative for cheap labor as there is a large labor force eager to work and is well renowned for its productiveness. This could harness brain drain of both the highly skilled and unskilled workers, and in turn positively benefit the nation.

Vatansver (2009) listed factors that lead employees to leave Europe for USA and among them was more favorable tax. Tax is a strong antecedent that can propel people to leave their homelands to other countries. In 2008, the Pay As You Earn (PAYE) in Zimbabwe was generally pegged at between 40% and 51% depending on one's monthly salary. Relaxing tax rates can help reduce brain drain in the country.

Efforts to design a pro-development response to this situation must not include restrictions on migration as they violate the fundamental values of human rights and individual freedom, (Gitlin, 2007). Although Zimbabwe does not have loudly pronounced restrictions on migrations, the costs and procedures of acquiring travel documents such as a passport are quite prohibitive. It costs US\$ 180 to apply for a passport yet an average salary of a private and public sector employee is US\$150. The Zimbabwean government needs to relax travel or migration policies so as to promote labor migration. It also needs to develop innovative and effective strategies for pooling Diasporas' immense, but largely untapped, intellectual, technical, financial and other resources and implement initiatives on much more substantive scales, in order to have much greater impact on Zimbabwean progress.

## **Conclusion**

While brain drain has been defined by many, as the migration of skilled manpower within countries and abroad in search of usually better conditions of service, the situation is slightly different in Zimbabwe. Instead of just the skilled workers leaving the country for better conditions of services many skilled workers left the country not only for similar skilled jobs, but also in some cases for menial jobs. However these menial jobs were then, in remuneration terms, better than the professional and technical jobs at home. While recommendations have been made on how Zimbabwe can deal with brain drain in an effort to turn it into brain circulation, the country, however, has to also deal with a little much more than what other countries have encountered. The term brain drain will first have to be put in context of the Zimbabwean situation so as to be able to include various groups of people, which would otherwise be excluded, such as the non-skilled citizens. Though not skilled, this group of people that has been adequately educated in the country can also contribute to brain circulation in various ways just like their skilled counterparts that left the country.

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