



SEEKING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

by Lydia Chibwe • photograph Shutterstock

GROWING UP IT IS NOT ALWAYS EASY TO IMAGINE A FUTURE MUCH DIFFERENT TO THE PRESENT YOU LIVE IN. YOU PRETTY MUCH EXPECT MORE OF THE SAME. BUT SOMETIMES THINGS CHANGE SO RADICALLY THAT ORDINARY CITIZENS FIND THEMSELVES FORCED TO LEAVE HOME IN SEARCH OF OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND THEIR BORDERS.

Whether for political or economic reasons, Zimbabweans have been spilling out of Zimbabwe by the thousands for the past two decades. Once known as the breadbasket of Africa,

a glimpse into Zimbabwe today reveals something out of a work of fiction filled with dark ironies.

I decided to study towards a master's degree after I could not find a job for what felt like an eternity. But an additional degree made no difference to my employability as the unemployment rate in Zimbabwe stands at 95 percent. I'm but one of thousands of MA holders that are jobless in Zimbabwe or work as child minders, domestic workers or street vendors in other countries.

A brief overview of Zimbabwean history reveals the following: After 2000

the economy of Zimbabwe shrank at an alarming pace. Since 2000, Zimbabwe has seized and forcibly redistributed most of the country's white-owned commercial farms with dire consequences in loss of export-quality productivity, employment for locals and it had a negative impact on foreign investment. Participation from 1998 to 2002 in the Democratic Republic of Congo war further drained the country of hundreds of millions of dollars. Hyperinflation escalated as of 2003, reaching a 231 million percent peak that would be superseded by a 500 billion percent in 2008

until the government suspended its own currency in 2009. A further driver of poverty was the Indigenisation Act of 2010 that required all enterprises in Zimbabwe to cede 51 percent ownership to indigenous Zimbabweans within five years. These factors scared away investors even further and saw many foreign-owned companies close down with further job losses for millions.

What did this mean for the average Zimbabwean? In this ludicrous affair nearly everyone was a millionaire. Although we had bills such as the 10 000 and 200 million Zimbabwe dollar(Z\$)



bills and later even bills called agro-cheque of Z\$ 50 billion, Z\$25 billion and Z\$5 billion, they served best as toilet paper. At one stage a kilo of mince would cost Z\$490 billion, orange juice Z\$300 billion and a tin of baked beans Z\$30 billion. No medication in hospitals meant people were dying in hospital. At one stage in 2008 learners were left without teachers for an indefinite period. Many at boarding school, like myself, had to go without bread for an extended period of time and resorted to samp with peanut butter or soup.

Today, in 2017, people queue at the bank as early as 3am for simple transactions such as withdrawals. The Zimbabwean dollar had first been replaced by the US dollar until it disappeared and we now use Bond notes. But you can only withdraw 30

“Bons” per day – whether at an ATM or inside the bank. Worst of all is that despite having come to the bank so early, you may not be successful on that particular day to withdraw the much needed cash to pay school fees, doctor’s bills or rent, because there are limited funds in circulation amongst the population.

It seems people may have it slightly better in rural areas. But for how long? There it is well-known that students were chased away from school because their parents failed to pay school fees. The system was then introduced that parents could pay school fees (!) with chickens, goats and cows. Other little weird and wonderful facts about Zimbabwe include that not only are the shelves in shops often empty, people are also sometimes without water. This is not

caused by a lack of water in our reservoirs but rather a lack of chemicals for purification. Also, degrees are not immediately awarded to graduates upon graduation. One reason whispered is to slow down the brain drain. For once students have their papers, nothing can stop them from hopping on a bus and seeking opportunities elsewhere – as I did.

As this piece is not a political analysis of the mess my country is in, I will not discuss the Zimbabwe Republic Police/ Black Boots/ riot police that are sent in to aggressively restore order when there is unrest amongst the people in response to the madness I just gave you a peek into.

Amidst my personal woes I heard that Namibia was looking for teachers. So even though I am not a teacher, I thought I’d throw my lot in with those teachers I knew of who found jobs three weeks after landing in Namibia. South Africa was not an option with its stories of xenophobia.

While many Zimbabweans have or had good jobs (with reference to the protests of the Association of Consulting Engineers of Namibia regarding preferential treatment of Zimbabwean engineers, architects, and quantity surveyors), my focus is really on those of us struggling to find a job in Namibia. Though degree holders, we find ourselves squatting in zink houses in Ombili and Hakahana where outside toilets are all we have to do our daily business in and where water must be bought each time it is needed. Home gardens are impossible in Windhoek so no vegetables accompany our meals, leaving us with pap and matangara only. Those of us living in areas such as Soweto

and Windhoek North live in brick houses but it remains overcrowded as we generally share accommodation to keep costs down. This means men and women live together in these rooms. Very often we are strangers to one another. For us women this arrangement can be very uncomfortable especially when we menstruate. We cannot grow roots in these conditions and our lives remain in limbo.

A refuge many Windhoekers might not imagine is the Katutura Community Library offering daily access to newspapers and free Wi-Fi that enable us to search for jobs and apply as often as we can. After weeks and months without success people end up taking any kind of informal employment despite the low wages that may reward 12-hour working days in difficult and stressful conditions.

Some of us survive on selling goods at public spaces such as Wernhil Mall and other open spaces. You have seen us selling fruits and vegetables, peanuts, peanut butter, belts, wallets, “droëwors,” mats, and steering wheel covers. In some cases women work as maids, child minders, or do piece jobs such as offering extra classes to students and also assisting in writing assignments and project proposals. And then there are the most desperate situations where some put their own bodies up for sale as well. The conditions we brave here are not only for our own survival but to send money home.

May Namibians learn from us Zimbabweans. Fight for a healthy democracy so that you too don’t end up scavenging in other countries that have to deal with their own unemployment. ♀