

# **Different, resilient and relevant: a conversation about time and space for the Zimbabwean diaspora**

**Roselyne Masamha and Julius Mugwagwa**

## **Summary**

This interactive presentation was a critical reflection on the roles that Zimbabwean diaspora populations can play in shaping economic and societal development trajectories in Zimbabwe. Building a case for recognition and harnessing of the difference, resilience and relevance of these populations, the presentation argued for a conversation around time and space as vantage points of knowledge co-location and co-creation which can be leveraged at different scales to enhance individual and societal progress. Using anecdotal and concrete case studies of Zimbabweans in the UK and in Zimbabwe, the presentation explored people's current locations in different professional settings, how they had to adjust from different or similar roles that they played in Zimbabwe and how this adjustment process could be a source of lessons as Zimbabwe tries to adjust into new and dynamic socio-economic contexts. In particular, one adjustment that was inevitable was the mindset on the time resource, in professional as well as the wider social spaces. It was envisaged that these adjustments and shifts could be tangible assets that would enable a different, yet relevant contribution to an evolving Zimbabwe by the diaspora. The ideas of difference, resilience and relevance have long permeated the stories of Zimbabweans in the diaspora. As a diaspora population, Zimbabweans regularly share experiences of sustained struggle and of constant compromise, that demonstrate a different kind of resilience and of battles to stay relevant against often challenging situations.

## **Being different: the advantages**

The sustained belief that as a people, Zimbabweans can do something different to what history will have us believe, is useful in creating hope against the backdrop of a climate that does not necessarily give a reason to hope. When we start to compare where Zimbabwe is against other more developed countries, it is easy to despair and think that we will never get there. We think this is only if we intend to follow exactly the same paths/steps to progression as these more developed places did – this would of course take us years. We can instead do things *differently* enabling us to cut out the long road to success and focus on a smarter approach. Automation for example is key to this – through lived experiences in the diaspora, we now have a different understanding of time to what we held prior to our sustained exposure to other cultures and subjection to different time rules. Time is money, time is ideas, time is possibilities, an ability to manipulate time rather than allowing time to manipulate us. We can make use of artificial intelligence and other new technologies, capitalising on our location and our access to information and relationships that we have now built with people from other nations, to enable us to present Zimbabwe in a more balanced way than the often-one-sided media representations.

Zimbabwe is also different in the sense that until recently Zimbabwe has been seen as a relatively stable and peaceful place, it is our hope that recent atrocities will be a blight of our past rather than a representation of what we normalise as the basis for our future interactions and value placed on human life and human suffering. We are cautious that this view is one that has and can be contested by other Zimbabweans whose history has not

reflected what has been triumphed as the good old days. Petina Gappah in her book *An elegy for Easterly* reminds us that there are some Zimbabweans for whom the 'good old days' never existed. What we hope for in the fullness of time is that our individual and collective exposures in the diaspora will create sustained comfort in our own identity and respect for differences (in vocations for example – let's face it, there are many who never saw domestic working and cleaning, even plumbing, as valued professions!), engagement across cultures, empowerment of people and broader social cohesion. There are, of course, intergenerational differences and tensions that need to be turned into opportunities.

### **Being different: the setbacks**

The notion of 'we are different' is, however, one of the reasons that as a Zimbabwean population we have often worked in isolation and failed to harness the power of collaboration with other African countries. An incredibly unhelpful perspective where a more broader inclusion approach could have resulted in significantly beneficial coalitions. From conversations with Zimbabweans in the UK who live in different regions, we have learnt a significant number of things that we did not know about our fellow Zimbabweans in the same country. That same ignorance permeates our assessment of others from the African continent. We recall even as young children holding a misguided belief that as Zimbabweans, we were better than other Africans, a rather unnecessary sense of superiority which ironically, we had just fought to rid ourselves of in the struggle for independence. Yet here we were exerting that same dominance over others. It was evident especially in the derogatory terms used to refer to people particularly from Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia in particular. It was there in our claim to higher rates of literacy, better fluency in English language, better infrastructure, more positive representation by the West – the manner in which we cling to the constantly reiterated 'bread basket of Africa'. While some of these things were true, our exclusive focus on our so-called progressiveness blindsided us to from understanding the fragility of this progressiveness particularly while operating in isolation. Today we now seek refuge from our own crisis in these – what were 'less progressive' neighbouring countries. We are there in Mozambique, in Zambia, Namibia, Tanzania, South Africa, Botswana - with their 'poor' infrastructure, their broken English, their supposed backwardness. We need to make an effort to understand each other's histories, how we became what we are and comprehend that our success as a people from the African continent comes from working together.

### **Necessity-induced resilience**

Living transnationally across different societies each with their own often competing demands, there are stories of both dislocation alongside sustained connections and resilience within the Zimbabwean diaspora is seen as in other diaspora through:

- Struggles to raise children within and against the surrounding culture.
- Workplace tensions, lack of progression, not being accepted
- Financial difficulties, balancing remittances and living expenses
- Belonging both at work and with the society
- To leave or to stay?

These realities have forced migrant individuals and communities alike to build resilience through some kind of 'innovating in adversity' responses, including, but not limited to the

building and deployment of competence, confidence, connection, character, contribution, coping, and control strategies.

### **Relevance**

The notion of relevance is a basic human need; to matter, to be valued, to be able to make a sustainable contribution. How can we make ourselves relevant – is a question that confronts diaspora communities regarding where they are and when they came from. The first step is to begin to see each other as resources rather than competitors. There is need to rid ourselves of the unhelpful tension between the Zimbabwean diaspora and Zimbabweans at home exercised through the popular ‘zvirikufaya’ memes which serve to present the competing arguments:

- *we are better because we left versus we are better because we stayed.*
- *We are the ones on the ground so our understanding of the situation is better because we are directly connected to what is happening, you are too far away VS we are a healthy distance away from the situation therefore we are in a better position to view it with perspective, you are too close to see things objectively*

Instead a more beneficial conversation would be one that acknowledges that different positionalities are an advantage to each other. If we begin to understand these contrasting positionalities as a tool for collaboration, we can begin to think and talk about how we can use these coalitions in highly effective ways. At present this is happening on a small scale mainly in relation to individual material and financial rewards. There is more to be done towards creating inclusive societal value leveraging our different geographical locations. There is a new social fabric to co-create within the realities of diaspora and home fronts that are likely to be present for a long time. Our different locations should not spawn feelings of being better, but should serve as sources of creativity for much-needed collective effort, national goodwill and resilience.