

INTERVIEW:

Jürgen Langen, Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Office in Zimbabwe, in an interview with the *KAS International Reports* editorial team.

ZIMBABWE

DICTATORSHIP AND ECONOMIC DESOLATION PUSH PEOPLE ABROAD

What are the main causes of emigration from Zimbabwe?

The economic situation is catastrophic. And it has probably still not bottomed out yet. There is no hope for improvement in the short or medium term. Unemployment stands at over 90 per cent. The few people who do have a job generally work as domestic help in private households or try to earn a living as hawkers. There is virtually no manufacturing left. Since mid-2013, some 5,000 companies have filed for bankruptcy.

The country, which used to supply its neighbours, particularly South Africa, with crops and meat, now relies on aid supplies from abroad. Since the so-called land reform, a lot of farm land is lying idle. The mismanagement is resulting in failed harvests and famine. Aid from outside sources is frequently obstructed or stopped altogether. After Zimbabweans had suffered from hyperinflation for years, foreign currencies such as the U.S. dollar were introduced as legal tender in 2009. But many people, particularly those in rural areas, have little access to foreign currencies.

Hospitals and clinics now lack even the most basic equipment, and the number of doctors is declining all the time. Many people are malnourished and die from treatable diseases such as malaria or diarrhoeal illnesses, and thousands of women die in childbirth. Statistical life expectancy in Zimbabwe has dropped below forty. AIDS still represents the largest problem, with approximately 15 per cent of 15 to 49-year-olds infected and hardly any access to medication and treatments.



Source: © Lucky.

The gap between the extremely rich and the extremely poor is becoming unbridgeable. Many businesses are closing, without new ones taking their place. There are few opportunities for young entrepreneurs. There is only a very small SME sector, yet it is the main target for taxation.

Added to this is the fact that numerous human rights are still denied to the population, such as the right to clean drinking water and to education. During better times, Zimbabwe had an education system that served as a model for many other African countries. The situation has deteriorated drastically. There is also a shortage of teaching staff, because the expensive trip to work is frequently not cost-effective for teachers in view of the extremely low pay. Classrooms remain empty. Approximately a fifth of the population is therefore illiterate.

Of course the political situation in Zimbabwe is also an important cause of emigration. President Mugabe has clung to absolute power for 34 years by engaging in unrelenting persecution, harassment and brutal treatment of

the opposition and its supporters as well as other persons classed as being anti-government. These activities included "Operation Murambatsvina", a large-scale campaign initiated by the Mugabe regime in 2005, during which slums and illegal settlements were razed to the ground. These places had generally been perceived as opposition strongholds. According to UN figures, at least 700,000 people lost their homes or their livelihoods during this campaign. It affected a further 2.5 million indirectly.



Since 2005, the security forces of the Mugabe regime have been conducting Operation Restore Order which is nothing else but clearing shanty towns and slums. More than three million people have lost their livelihood directly or indirectly due to those evictions. | Source: Sokwanele, flickr ©①②③.

After the presidential election of March 2008, which according to the general view had been won by opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, security forces loyal to Mugabe responded with a brutal operation code-named "Mavhotera Papi?" ("Who did you vote for?"). An estimated 500 followers of the opposition party MDC-T were murdered in the process, and tens of thousands more tortured and maimed.

Zimbabwe has a president who, despite his advanced age (91), intends to cling to power forever. He controls the army, the police, the national security services and special North Korean trained commandos. Mugabe exercises a monopoly over radio and TV stations, pays judges to ensure favourable rulings and placed the election preparations into the hands of foreign secret service forces in order

to exercise the greatest possible control over the voting public. The President uses fear as an "effective" means to push through governmental measures and exercise power. The Catholic Church has provided solid documentary proof of the perpetrated atrocities and of the identity of the President's willing henchmen, and it can only be hoped that he and his supporters will one day be called to account.

Who are the people who are emigrating?

Zimbabwe is experiencing a massive exodus of qualified individuals and therefore also potential employers. Economics graduates, business graduates, journalists, farmers, engineers, tradesmen and academics are leaving the country in search of opportunities to make a decent livelihood. There are hardly any doctors or nurses left. The country no longer has a functioning health care system.

Where do Zimbabweans who seek a better life abroad go to?

Some 2.5 million Zimbabweans live in South Africa and some 250,000 in Botswana. Many Zimbabweans are starting a new life above all in anglophone countries: some 500,000 in the UK, 50,000 each in the U.S. and in Canada as well as approximately 40,000 in Australia and New Zealand. There are now more nurses and doctors from Zimbabwe living in the City of London than remain in their home country. Almost all former Air Zimbabwe pilots are now working for the Emirates airline. African countries outside the SADC region are less attractive destinations. Only around 20,000 Zimbabweans have emigrated to Western or Eastern Africa.

What difficulties are migrants facing in the host countries?

There is already a term for this circulating in South Africa: xenophobia – the fear of strangers, of foreigners and their rejection; this particularly affects the Zimbabweans. They are known to be honest, reliable, diligent and hard-working and they compete with South Africans for jobs. In fact, almost all successful South African companies employ immigrants from Zimbabwe in their middle management

echelons. Xenophobia in the neighbouring country has become so prevalent of late that Zimbabweans avoid disclosing their nationality as they are likely to experience abuse, which frequently leads to bloody confrontations.



More tolerance: About 2.5 million Zimbabweans live in South Africa. They feel more and more threatened by xenophobia and open hostility. But mere expressions of solidarity such as in the depicted demonstration in Cape Town do not suffice to tackle the problem. | Source: Janah Hattingh, flickr ©📷.

Added to this is the fact that Zimbabweans find it difficult to obtain visas and work permits in South Africa. The fees are high and applications are handled very restrictively. Despite the situation, Zimbabweans are very attached to their home country. There are hardly any other African nationals who hanker more after their country than Zimbabweans. They suffer badly from homesickness, even if they have their family living with them.

Does the diaspora play a role in politics and society or is that not possible due to Zimbabwe's isolation?

There tends to be little opportunity for emigrated Zimbabweans to exert political influence on the situation in their native country. The diaspora is subject to monitoring and even persecution by the Zimbabwean secret service and national security forces, who extend their reach into the host countries, such as the UK. There have been repeated instances of unexplained deaths of opposition figures, who had spoken out against Mugabe in their new host country.

The impact on society, on the other hand, is there for all to see. Zimbabwe's population is now composed almost entirely of the very young and the very old. Many children hardly know their own parents. They are frequently given into the care of their grandparents so that the parents can take on jobs abroad to scrape together enough to feed their families.

What are the consequences of the exodus of academics and skilled workers for Zimbabwe? Do their money transfers back home help to prop up the economy?

The fact that potential SME employers and qualified specialists such as tradesmen and people with management potential such as business graduates are leaving the country is resulting in the number of jobs declining even further and companies being bankrupted through poor management.

Without regular payments from family members living abroad, hardly any Zimbabwean family would be able to support itself. With unemployment standing at around 90 per cent, there is no way to earn money for food, clothes, education or doctors. However, the transfers from abroad are generally no longer transacted through banks but by virtual means, particularly over the mobile phone network. Almost every Zimbabwean, whatever the age and gender, has a mobile phone that allows cashless money transfers. This enables Zimbabweans to receive transfers and to make payments themselves. International money transfer businesses have adapted to this and now also facilitate transactions from abroad to such mobile phone accounts. Zimbabwean mobile network operators are incidentally some of the few businesses in the country that are making a profit and that can create jobs.