

Dynamics of Protection in a Shrinking Economy: A Peak into Zimbabwe's Refugee Regime

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Abstract

Zimbabwe has consistently experienced an influx of refugees despite its shrinking economy. This places a heavy burden on the state to provide social protection to refugees. There are limited studies that focus on the dynamics of refugee protection in resource-constrained countries like Zimbabwe, often characterized as being only immigrant-sending countries. We use data from 12 in-depth interviews with key informants to explore how the prolonged socio-economic crisis has impacted the state's ability to provide social protection to refugees in Zimbabwe. The study also explores the relationship between the state and other stakeholders in hosting refugees in Zimbabwe. The findings suggest that socio-economic challenges in a shrinking economy affect the protection outcomes of refugees regardless of the presence of a robust refugee regime in the country.

Keywords: migration, refugees, shrinking economies, social protection, COVID-19, Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

The number of refugees continues to increase globally. Much of the increase is attributed to pervasive persecution, conflicts, violence, human rights violations, and similar events that significantly disturb national and global peace and public order (UNHCR, 2021). According to the UNHCR (2023), these disturbances have seen the global statistics of refugees reaching 43.3 million by the end of 2023, registering a notable increase compared to numbers at the end of 2022. This increasing global challenge has become a significant strain on host countries, especially in light of the social protection mandate levied on host countries by the international protocols on refugees (Andrade et al., 2021; Kool and Nimeh, 2021). In international law, refugees have a legal right to flee from hostile and dangerous conditions and seek safety in any country where their rights will be upheld (Kool and Nimeh, 2021; UNHCR, 2021). In line with conventions and protocols on refugee governance, the host countries are responsible for protecting the refugees while they remain in their jurisdiction (Klaaren and Rutinwa, 2004). However, although refugees are a priority on the global agenda (Micinski, 2020), the issue of protection has become complicated (Kool and Nimeh, 2021; Seyfert and Quarterman, 2021).

Much of the complication stems from the fact that many host governments that are supposed to receive these populations have reached elevated levels of fatigue. For example, in the Global South, countries such as South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe continue to welcome refugees and asylum seekers while the opposite holds for countries in the Global North (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). In the Global South, much of the influx is spurred by proximity to the countries with ongoing and increasing protracted conflicts, growing economic challenges, and the ever-tightening mobility restrictions to the Global North (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). Host countries that would ordinarily welcome and host refugees gradually reach fatigue (UIA, 2020) due to the increased influx of people, a phenomenon that has been termed compassion fatigue (Raney, 2019). The willingness and capacity of Global North countries to assist, especially considering the current economic stagnation and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, have been intensely tested by the continued influx of refugees. Notably, the ever-increasing number of displaced persons seeking refuge in other countries has led governments in the West to devise policies that contain xenophobic connotations (Coen, 2021; Crawley, 2021). Some countries impose strict border controls that constrain the flow of refugees into their countries, most of which are contrary to the inclusionary fundamentals espoused in the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). For countries in the Global South, such as South Africa, the fatigue and resentment have increased, as they are overwhelmed by the double burden of having to offer protection to their citizens and to the refugee populations (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022; Wamara et al., 2022). Given the economic crises typical of most economies in the Global South, the influx of refugees often triggers conflicts between host communities and refugee populations, as they compete for scarce resources. Hence, most countries have

resorted to the encampment policy to reduce conflicts (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). In refugee protection, the encampment policy refers to a system where host countries accommodate refugees in refugee camps where there is little to no integration with host communities. Conversely, some countries, like South Africa, have devised immigration policies that allow refugees to reside within local communities and thus integrate with the local population.

The fatigue in the Global North is epitomized by the now overturned multimillion-dollar deal recently signed between the United Kingdom (UK) and Rwanda (Kampmark, 2022; Limb, 2022; Oxford Analytica, 2022). The deal was a culmination of the UK's plan to tackle the challenge of illegal migration by transferring irregular immigrants (arriving on small boats or smuggled in lorries) to Rwanda to process their asylum and refugee claims (Limb, 2022). According to officials from both countries, the deal was seen as a migration and economic development partnership (Soy, 2022). The former Conservative UK government had anticipated that it would be a move to eliminate the irregular migration syndicates involved in criminal smuggling. That policy sparked controversy because the refugees and asylum seekers whose claims were accepted would be resettled in Rwanda with the support of the UK government. Although other countries have made similar arrangements, for example, Australia and its offshore detention centers in 2001, as well as Israel and Denmark, accusations have been leveled against the UK. For instance, Limb (2022: 1) proffers that "the UK stands widely accused of trading refugees as commodities to a repressive state, trashing legal obligations, and undermining international protections of refugees." Rights groups also criticized the proposed plans as irresponsible and inhumane because similar approaches implemented elsewhere have failed, leading to humanitarian catastrophes and loss of lives (Kampmark, 2022; Limb, 2022). Moreover, the UNHCR had also condemned the deal, noting that it "evades international obligations, and is contrary to the letter and spirit of the Refugee Convention" (UNHCR, 2022a).

Deals such as the proposed UK–Rwanda scheme emanate from the challenges experienced by the host countries in offering protection to refugees. Besides the costs incurred, refugee protection is problematic, as it causes conflicts and resentment in communities (Neis et al., 2018). The increased competition for employment and services and the ever-increasing rent and food prices are significant drivers of increased tensions within host communities (Kool and Nimeh, 2021). Therefore, in most instances, the conflicts result from disgruntled citizens who view refugees as competitors who receive services and goods that locals do not receive. Thus, if the influx of refugees causes many challenges in these already established economies, the situation can only be worse in resource-constrained countries.

Given the anti-refugee sentiments in the Global North, many non-European refugees and asylum seekers end up in neighboring countries that are resource constrained (Kool and Nimeh, 2021; UNHCR, 2021). This means that if refugees make their way to the nearest possible place, they will most likely end up in these

shrinking economies. This paper explores why refugees end up in these resource-constrained countries and addresses the critical question of protection dynamics in some of these countries with shrinking economies. Its main aim is to gain a theoretical grounding on refugee protection in countries with ailing economies. Undeniably, taking care of refugees' basic needs such as food, education, shelter, and health is very costly. This paper addresses the question of who bears the refugee protection costs, since the encamped refugees do not contribute to the economy but benefit from the host country's resources. Clearly, there are inherent tensions in what would be considered the ideal situations for refugee protection. Using the case of Zimbabwe, this paper addresses the most critical question of the dynamics of protection when the conditions are far from ideal. The paper aims to assess the impact of the prolonged socio-economic and political crises on the country's ability to provide the required protection and welfare services to the refugees it hosts. Furthermore, the paper seeks to understand the relationship between the state and other stakeholders in hosting refugees in Zimbabwe. This country presents a unique case because it is characterized by protracted macroeconomic challenges that have persisted for over two decades. Its economy is characterized by hyperinflation and limited economic productivity. In essence, the economy has shrunk over the years due to deindustrialization. Despite this scenario, the country continues to host refugees from different countries and there continues to be a steady increase in the number of refugees.

ZIMBABWE'S EXPERIENCE WITH REFUGEES

Migration scholarship has long portrayed Zimbabwe as a major emigrant and refugee sender due to the protracted economic meltdown and political challenges stretching over the past three decades (Crush and Tevera, 2010; Crush et al., 2015; McGregor and Pasura, 2010; McGregor and Primorac, 2010; Mlambo, 2010). It is well documented that due to the economic and political challenges, the country transitioned from being a major receiver of migrants to being one of the biggest senders in the region (Crush and Tevera, 2010; Ncube, 2010). However, what has received less attention is the scholarship focusing on the refugee movements into Zimbabwe and the country's experiences in hosting refugees and asylum seekers (Chikanda and Crush, 2016; Takaindisa, 2021). Undeniably, Zimbabwe has hosted refugees since the 1980s (Chikanda and Crush, 2016; Matseketsa and Mhlanga, 2020; Sidzumo-Mazibuko, 1998). However, while the subject of refugees has gained considerable attention from migration scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa, there are knowledge gaps about Zimbabwe's ability to meet its refugee population's protection and welfare needs, considering the ongoing economic challenges.

The first refugees in Zimbabwe were from war-torn Mozambique in the early 1980s. They fled the protracted war between the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO) and the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), which pitted opposition ideologies and regions against each other (Chikanda and Crush, 2016; Emerson, 2014). Throughout the 1980s, the country also received trickles of refugees

from South Africa comprising of political activists fleeing the repressive rule of the apartheid government (Chikanda and Crush, 2016). Although there was a notable flow from South Africa, Mozambique remained the major source. Between 1983 and 1994 Zimbabwe hosted over 200,000 Mozambican refugees (Emerson, 2014; Matseketsa and Mhlanga, 2020). This increased flow of refugees in the 1980s can be linked to the political disturbances in its neighboring countries (Chikanda and Crush, 2016). Notably, much of Zimbabwe's generosity was driven by the spirit of comradeship spurred by the need to protect fellow neighbors who had sheltered Zimbabwe's freedom fighters and its refugees during the war for independence (Munguambe, 2020).

Responding to the growing influx of refugees, the Government of Zimbabwe adopted an encampment policy by establishing four rural refugee camps in 1984, namely Tongogara, Chambuta, Nyan'ombe, and Nyamatiki (Matseketsa and Mhlanga, 2020; Mutsvara, 2015) and the fifth in 1990 known as the Mazowe River Bridge (Chikanda and Crush, 2016; Sidzumo-Mazibuko, 1998). The encampment policy restricted refugees' mobility and their ultimate integration into local communities (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022; Wamara et al., 2022). To date, the Zimbabwean government restricts all refugees to camps, with limited freedom to explore economic options (Matseketsa and Mhlanga, 2020; Wamara et al., 2022). Given the high inflow of Mozambicans fleeing the war in their country, these camps were often overcrowded (Chikanda and Crush, 2016). For example, the state established the Tongogara Refugee Camp (TRC) in 1984, with a carrying capacity of 10,000 refugees, but in 1993 it had a population of 52,000 refugees (Chikanda and Crush, 2016). Similarly, the Mazowe River Bridge Camp's maximum capacity was 5,000, but in 1993 it housed over 34,000 refugees, almost six times its capacity (Chikanda and Crush, 2016; Sidzumo-Mazibuko, 1998; UNHCR, 1994).

During this period, the camps were almost exclusively occupied by Mozambican refugees (Chikanda and Crush, 2016). In 1994, FRELIMO and RENAMO signed a peace treaty known as the Rome Agreement (see Emerson, 2014). This resulted in a huge reduction in the number of refugees in the country and the closure of some refugee camps in 1994, leaving the TRC as the only operational camp in the country (Chikanda and Crush, 2016; Matseketsa and Mhlanga, 2020). To date, the TRC remains the only functional camp and is home to approximately 14,413 refugees and asylum seekers (Matseketsa and Mhlanga, 2020; Mhlanga, 2020).

Although the end of the war in Mozambique led to a significant decline in the number of refugees in Zimbabwe, the growing incidence of wars and internal conflicts on the African continent saw a gradual increase in the numbers and sources of refugees in Zimbabwe (Matseketsa and Mhlanga, 2020; Mutsvara, 2015). In the 1990s, there was a notable diversification in the origins of refugee flows in the country, with the source patterns showing a global character (Chikanda and Crush, 2016). Notably, most of the source countries both in and outside Africa were characterized by internal strife and political disturbances (Sidzumo-Mazibuko, 1998). For example,

Rwanda was experiencing genocide while the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was engaged in war (Matseketsa and Mhlanga, 2020; Mhlanga, 2020; Mutsvara, 2015). By the end of the 1990s, the DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda were the major origin countries for refugees in Zimbabwe (Chikanda and Crush, 2016; Sidzumo-Mazibuko, 1998). Part of the increase in the influx of refugees from the Great Lakes region, mostly Rwandans, during this time was caused by the fact that they had been debarred from Tanzania's Ngara refugee camp (Mutsvara, 2015). According to Jakachira (2003), these refugees did not want to return to their country because they feared retribution from their government. Moreover, the en masse influx of refugees into Zimbabwe was also spurred by the emergence of terrorists in Nigeria, Central African Republic, and Mali, growing ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia, and the perpetual insecurities in Somalia and the DRC (Chikanda and Crush, 2016; Matseketsa and Mhlanga, 2020). With the return of stability in some regions, for example, the Great Lakes, peace in countries like Burundi and Rwanda led to a significant decrease in the number of refugees in Zimbabwe. This was further exacerbated by the economic demise that the country experienced in the early 2000s, climaxing in 2008, making Zimbabwe an unattractive destination for refugees. Notwithstanding this scenario, episodes of instability in some countries like the DRC led to a continued presence of refugees in the country (Chikanda and Crush, 2016).

Zimbabwe's economic outlook continues to be characterized by high uncertainty. However, amidst all these socio-economic challenges characteristic of the country, Zimbabwe has remained host to refugees and asylum seekers from the Great Lakes region since 1998 (WFP and UNHCR, 2019). This influx of refugees presents population pressures that strain the already distressed government resources, compromising its effective service provision to the country's population.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research site for this study was the TRC in Zimbabwe. The refugee camp is located in the Chipinge district, 600 km southeast of the Harare Metropolitan Province (Mhlanga and Zengeya, 2016). This is the only refugee camp that is currently operational in Zimbabwe. Therefore, any study that seeks to understand refugee dynamics in Zimbabwe is likely to gain rich insights by using this refugee camp as a case study.

This paper followed a qualitative research methodological approach. This approach was the most appropriate to employ, given the need to gain an in-depth understanding of refugee protection dynamics in a refugee center with multiple actors. To gain an insider perspective, there was a need for a more explorative approach that enabled the researchers to gather diverse narratives on the different roles played by different actors and how they collectively worked toward providing protection in a shrinking economy. The research team gathered qualitative data through in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants who represented different stakeholders at the TRC in Zimbabwe. The researchers purposively drew a

sample of 12 key informants from different organizations operating at the TRC. These included officials from the Ministry of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare (MoPSSLW), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), World Vision Zimbabwe, Doctors Without Borders (MSF), and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the camp. To achieve representative diversity, it was crucial for the researchers to use purposive sampling to select representatives of key actors who played a role in the continued functioning of the refugee camp.

The research team conducted all the interviews in this study in English; hence, there was no need for translations, as all participants understood and spoke the language fluently. In conducting this study, researchers applied due ethical consideration for dealing with human subjects in research and followed the ethical standards and principles as detailed in the Helsinki Declaration. In addition, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Alliance of Biodiversity International and the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) evaluated the ethical considerations of the study, and it was approved under clearance number 2023-IRB72. Prior to the interviews, the research team developed an informed consent sheet that advised participants about different aspects of the study, including envisaged risks and benefits, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw from the study at any given moment, and participants' consent for audio recording the interviews. All those who participated in the study signed the consent form as an indication that they voluntarily agreed to participate in this study.

In the process of data analysis, the research team coded all the interview transcripts for ease of identification and assigned the codes according to the order of the interviews. For example, the first interview was coded as Informant 1 up to the last interview that was coded as Informant 12. After this first coding round, researchers coded the transcripts according to emerging themes and then analyzed them thematically. Maxwell and Chmiel (2013) define coding as a strategy used to organize qualitative data. The process entails the identification of distinct concepts and themes in the data, which then form master headings that become the basic units of analysis (Flick, 2013; Gibbs, 2007). In this study, researchers applied coding inductively based on the emerging themes from the data. Furthermore, they derived first-order codes from the emerging key themes that directed analysis of the refugee regime in Zimbabwe and the social protection initiatives at the TRC. The themes developed formed subheadings under which the research team presented and discussed findings supported by direct excerpts from the interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The state and its obligations of refugee protection

There are three main elements of social protection that vulnerable people such as refugees need: social assistance in the form of access to basic needs; livelihoods support and capacity development; and labor market interventions (Andrade et al., 2021; Barrientos and Santibáñez 2009). The participants of this study agreed that

the state has the responsibility to provide comprehensive protection services to the refugees they host. Commenting on the general obligations of the state at law, some key informants reported as follows:

The Refugee Act mandates the government to ensure non-discrimination, non-penalization, and adherence to the non-return policy for refugees (Informant 1, September 2022).

The government should ensure that every recognized refugee is entitled to rights and [is] subject to duties contained in the 1951 Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (Informant 5, September 2022).

According to the UNHCR (undated), the first obligation to ensure basic human rights and physical security of citizens lies with governments. However, when people are displaced and driven out of their countries for whatever reason and become refugees or asylum seekers, this safety net ceases to exist. Considering this, global treaties, conventions, and compacts mandate host countries to uphold and protect the basic human rights of these displaced persons (Barnett, 2002; Chikanda and Crush, 2016). It is from this point of departure that the participants of this study correctly identified the Government of Zimbabwe as responsible for providing protection to all refugees and displaced persons who make their way to Zimbabwe.

The findings of this study show that while the Zimbabwean state provides protection to refugees, it faces resource constraints that limit its capacity. As a result, the state becomes overly dependent on the support of partner organizations. In Zimbabwe, this study found that the Office of the Commissioner for Refugees in the Department of Social Development (MoPWLSW) is largely funded by the UNHCR, including staff salaries, vehicles, and expenses for the programmes implemented in the camp. Therefore, regarding social assistance and access to basic needs, submissions from key informants suggest that although the state has a bigger mandate, it mainly provides services that cannot be delegated to other partners. These include registration, status determination, and provision of security. Some key informants explained:

TRC is wholly established and owned by the government of Zimbabwe and the government of Zimbabwe has the obligation to provide peace and security, shelter, food, education, health, and all other basic needs and social amenities for refugees (Informant 9, September 2022).

The settlement has a Zimbabwe Republic Police base manned by five police officers to provide security and protection services (Informant 7, September 2022).

In line with the Zimbabwe Refugee Act, the government takes the lead in the refugee status determination, issuance of refugee identity cards, birth, marriage and death certificates, and travel documents through the Registrar General's Office. It also issues temporary passes for refugees through the Immigration Department (Informant 3, September 2022).

The above excerpts suggest that resource-intensive protection services have been delegated to the partners, with the UNHCR as the main partner. However, while this can be confused with the state negating its obligations, consideration must be given to the state's resource constraints. Zimbabwe has a documented history of economic turmoil that has persisted for over two decades (Kanyenze et al., 2017; Mhlanga and Ndhlovu, 2021; Raftopoulos, 2006). According to Mhlanga and Ndhlovu (2021), while southern African countries experienced broad-based economic expansion in the past 20 years, Zimbabwe remained an exception, largely owing to its poor economic policies and haphazard land reform program. Kanyenze et al. (2017) point out that between 1999 and 2008, Zimbabwe experienced a 52% decline in its gross domestic product (GDP). To date, there is still skepticism around the official economic indicators due to years of hyperinflation and currency failures that decimated the formal sectors. Therefore, the country is a classic case of a shrinking economy that still hosts refugees, despite its limitations. What stands out from the findings of this study is that while the country is poorly resourced, this has not stopped the state from facilitating processes that result in those in need of protection accessing it, even if this means allowing capacitated partners such as the UNHCR to contribute significant resources to keep the program running. In addition, documentation is a widespread problem in refugee management globally, yet this does not seem to be the case in Zimbabwe, where processes are well coordinated to ensure that refugees' needs in this regard are met. In a shrinking economy, strategic partnerships appear to be the sustaining factor in ensuring that vulnerable groups such as refugees access some relief.

Refugee protection services through strategic partnerships

The findings of this study show that at the TRC in Zimbabwe, the UNHCR is the leading strategic partner that works with several partner organizations to complement government efforts in the provision of different protection services to refugees. Table 1 shows the different partners who work together in ensuring that refugees receive the protection they need. While several of these strategic partners are non-state actors, there are some state actors, such as the MoPWLSW. Each partner provides unique support while at times consolidating their efforts to meet the most urgent needs.

Table 1: Partners at TRC and the protection services offered

Partner	Protection services offered
Department of Social Development (MoPWSLW)	Registration, camp coordination and management, shelter, refugee status determination
UNHCR	Registration, durable solutions, shelter, water and sanitation, livelihoods, food security, refugee status determination
WFP	Cash transfers
Terres des Hommes (Italy)	Education, health, child protection, food security, GBV prevention, mitigation and response, life-skills training
World Vision Zimbabwe	WASH and livelihoods
Jesuit Refugee Service	Education, vocational training, pastoral services
Childline	Child protection
MSF (Doctors Without Borders)	Community mental health services (non-clinical)
Zimbabwe Council of Churches	Peace, justice, and conflict resolution
Zimbabwe Red Cross Society	ICT, tracing and restoring family links, livelihoods

Source: Authors' work

As observed in Table 1, the services provided through the strategic partnerships include social assistance, access to basic services, livelihoods support, and capacity development. Commenting on social assistance and access to basic services, some of the key informants offered the following narrations:

We provide psychosocial support services to the refugees at the TRC. Our needs assessment indicated a gap in terms of mental healthcare needs for the camp population and we believe our mental health program will build resilience and community coping skills, which will ultimately improve the well-being of the camp population (Informant 12, September 2022).

The host community [at the ward, district, and provincial levels] is essential in ensuring the peaceful co-existence of refugees and communities (Informant 4, September 2022).

The above excerpts demonstrate that refugee protection and assistance is a priority that the collective efforts of strategic partners and surrounding communities strive

for, despite the shrinking economy of Zimbabwe. However, the findings of this study suggest that assistance to refugees must go beyond protection and aim toward finding durable solutions that will allow refugees to rebuild their lives. As a result, providing livelihood support and promoting economic inclusion for refugees have been highlighted as notable contributions from strategic partners. In this regard, some refugees were offered opportunities to embark on self-reliance and economic-empowerment programs to enhance their livelihoods. Despite the scarcity of resources and an ailing Zimbabwean economy, these strategic partnerships demonstrate the concerted efforts to provide refugees with better life experiences at the TRC. The following interview excerpts acknowledge these efforts:

Some partners at the TRC offer self-reliance and livelihoods programs to help refugees in rebuilding their lives. Different actors offer different services that are an attempt to provide durable solutions to refugees at the camp (Informant 1, September 2022).

The UNHCR and other partners work with the government to provide community empowerment, self-reliance, and livelihoods assistance to refugees in line with the state, regional, and international obligations (Informant 3, September 2022).

Moreover, these interview excerpts corroborate a report by the UNHCR (2022b) that states that this multilateral institution and its partners have managed to support a number of livelihoods programs at the TRC. Examples cited include a hydroponics agricultural project where refugees managed to produce vegetables for consumption and income generation. In addition, there is an income-generating poultry project where refugees have close to 500 hens that produce eggs (UNHCR, 2022b). Some partners offered capacity development programs, albeit limited in their scope, aimed at equipping refugees with skills suitable for the labor market. An informant confirmed the efforts aimed at skills development:

Partners have been trying to build refugee capacity through vocational skills training. The goal has been to improve the skills base of the refugees so that they may be fit to join the labor market (Informant 2, September 2022).

Notwithstanding the partners' efforts, the macroeconomic environment in the country has been detrimental to the protection efforts of the different stakeholders at TRC. Scholars have documented Zimbabwe's currency crisis and hyperinflation that made it difficult to earn and secure livelihoods (Kudzai, 2023; Lieto, 2023). This has also affected social-protection efforts, as it made it very difficult to plan and budget in the local currency, leading to an over-reliance on foreign currency that is difficult to come by (Lieto, 2023).

The shrinking economy and its implications for refugee protection

The Zimbabwean economy has been experiencing prolonged challenges that have persisted from the early 1990s to date (Kanyenze et al., 2017; Mhlanga and Ndhlovu, 2021). These were worsened by the fast-track land reform program that led to economic sanctions, which isolated Zimbabwe from the global economic system for decades (Nzima and Gumindega, 2023). During the period between 2019 and 2020, Zimbabwe experienced severe external shocks, namely cyclone Idai, protracted drought, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). These shocks, compounded by flawed policies during the same period, culminated in a significant recession and peak inflation of 837% (UNDP, 2020). The trends have continued to date, with significant implications for the ability of the TRC stakeholders to provide effective protection services to refugees. Kudzai (2023) maintains that the macroeconomic conditions continue to erode the state's revenue base, compromising its ability to provide meaningful social protection to its citizenry, such as providing social safety nets. If the state struggles to provide social protection to citizens, the situation can only be worse for refugees and asylum seekers. A key informant reported the following:

The government does not have resources, and the pervasive macroeconomic challenges continue to cripple the government and further diminish its ability to provide protection to refugees (Informant 1, September 2022).

Resource scarcity resulting from the diminishing economic conditions in the country has negatively affected the state's ability to provide effective protection to refugees (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). This is exacerbated by the continued arrival of new refugees putting an additional strain on the government's ability to provide adequate protection. Nearly all key informants expressed these sentiments. An informant from one of the partner organizations said the following:

The continued influx of refugees and asylum seekers results in increased annual resource needs for shelter and classrooms as well as increased teacher-pupil ratios (Informant 9, September 2022).

The findings of this study suggest that the prevailing macroeconomic conditions at both the national and global levels have led to a scarcity of donor funding (UNDP, 2020). Donor funding has been dwindling and in the recent past, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine resulted in the diversion of funds to focus on these issues, significantly reducing funding for refugee protection, as seen in the following excerpt:

The government does not have resources, and the pervasive socio-economic challenges continue to cripple the government and further diminish its ability to provide protection to refugees (Informant 1, September 2022).

The economic reality in Zimbabwe has created significant challenges for the state and its strategic partners due to resource constraints and an ever-increasing demand for services (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022; UNDP, 2020). As a result, partners face the dilemma of having to do more with less, as the refugee population at the camp continues to increase. The following interview excerpts provide further insight:

It has been difficult for partners to provide sustainable and durable livelihood projects to refugees and asylum seekers. Also, markets for the produce have been difficult to find and sustain (Informant 9, September 2022).

The hyperinflationary environment in the country complicates partner interventions as it erodes the value of the assistance they give (Informant 11, September 2022).

The UNHCR operation has low budgets due to its small caseload and has had to prioritize lifesaving interventions. Again, the high cost of goods locally has pushed the organization to consider international procurement for value for money and accountability, but global supply-chain breaks mean delays, more so in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic ... The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have resulted in a diversion of funds to focus on these issues, significantly reducing funding for refugee protection (Informant 3, September 2022).

The findings of this study suggest that the ongoing shrinking of the Zimbabwean economy does not only constrain the state's ability to fulfill its mandate, but strategic partners are also affected, and this limits their capacity to provide adequate protection to refugees. The difficult economic environment has led to the erosion of safety nets for improved livelihoods as donor funding continues to dry up. This means that refugees are left in a state of perpetual dependency on aid and handouts, a situation that renders them perpetually vulnerable. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic and other shocks have had significant impacts on the effective provision of protection services to refugees.

COVID-19 and the provision of protection services at the TRC

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a disruption in the provision of basic services globally. A fuller understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees in Zimbabwe requires a holistic appreciation of the shocks that have rocked their realities in the recent past. According to Alio et al. (2020), refugees across the

globe are heterogeneously affected by various shocks, including pandemics, conflicts, climate-induced disasters, and poverty. Before the pandemic, refugees already existed in precarious and cramped conditions with adverse public health conditions that could easily facilitate the rapid spread of diseases (Alio et al., 2020; Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). Although the effects of the pandemic were almost universal and similar, not all populations were affected equally. Crawley (2021) asserts that the pandemic amplified and deepened existing inequalities, with refugees and other stateless persons being the most adversely affected, because they are often the poorest with precarious livelihoods and are most deprived in terms of protection. As such, the pandemic affected them on many levels. The findings of this study show that at the TRC, the pandemic crippled basic service delivery. It impacted both the availability of resources and the actual service provision. The pandemic forced partners to divert resources to ensure compliance with the sanitary regulations to curb the spread of the virus. This meant resources initially earmarked for the provision of protection services to refugees were channeled towards addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Informants from partner organizations confirmed this unfortunate reality:

The COVID-19 pandemic meant diversion of resources by governments and partners to ensure compliance with the sanitary guidelines and procure medication. Moreover, the donor countries experienced shocks leading to reduced donations (Informant 3, September 2022).

Lockdown restrictions meant reduced earning capacity for many, including refugees (Informant 11, September 2022).

In addition, the findings of this study show that the resultant lockdowns and mobility restrictions had an adverse effect on the livelihoods and economic empowerment initiatives implemented at the camp. Refugees could not move around to sell their products, and this crippled their ability to earn. This occurred against a backdrop that refugees are generally in a marginalized socio-economic position (Crawley, 2021), and restrictions on their economic activities plunged them into deeper precarity. Moreover, the restrictions affected the repatriation and resettlement of refugees. The suspension of the asylum procedures due to COVID-19 left refugees in conditions of protracted uncertainty while exacerbating their already dire living conditions (Crawley, 2021; Ghezlbash and Feith Tan, 2020). The restrictions further affected children's access to education and the camp population's ability to access healthcare services beyond the camp. Other studies note similar findings, detailing the effects of the pandemic on education and health services (Matsilele, 2021; Mbunge et al., 2020; Murewanhema and Makurumidze, 2020). Some key informants reported the following:

COVID-19 negatively affected access to education for children in TRC because they were out of school for prolonged periods without access to e-learning facilities. This has resulted in low pass rates among the refugee population (Informant 10, September 2022).

Refugees rely on the national healthcare system and during hard lockdown, services at some major referral centers were suspended due to the pandemic and this negatively affected refugees in need of health services (Informant 12, September 2022).

This study also found that officials from partner organizations could not move freely to implement some of the programs at the camp, which left refugees with limited assistance and increased vulnerability. Moreover, the inability of the Zimbabwe Refugee Committee to meet and process status determination meant that during the COVID-19 pandemic, many refugees remained entirely undocumented. The findings confirm Crawley's (2021) assertion that one of the biggest consequences of the pandemic has been the stalling of status determination, which in some instances compromised refugees' access to rights, work opportunities, healthcare, and education. To augment this, some of the key informants indicated the following:

Service delivery in many government departments that serve refugees and asylum seekers was disrupted at the height of the pandemic (Informant 9, September 2022).

The Zimbabwe Refugee Committee used to meet monthly for refugee status determination, that is, conducting interviews for asylum seekers to determine whether their cases warrant a refugee status. Due to COVID-19, the committee has not been meeting and there is now a backlog in cases (Informant 3, September 2022).

Although there were challenges, some positive innovations emerged that improved service delivery. Partners devised strategies to circumvent the effects of restrictions around COVID-19. Key informants further narrated that COVID-19 led to innovations in service provision such as online lessons, WhatsApp surveillance and reporting for child protection and gender-based violence. Partners will continue the implementation of these strategies in the post-COVID-19 era. Therefore, the pandemic significantly affected the provision of protection services to refugees, further exacerbating inequality and precarity in their living conditions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper concludes that socio-economic challenges in fragile economies significantly affect the welfare and protection outcomes of refugees, regardless of the presence of a robust refugee regime in the country. In addition, accepting refugees remains a political statement of sovereignty, and the macroeconomic instability in shrinking economies may easily mar regional solidarity and the success of the ambitions. In Zimbabwe, the protracted socio-economic crisis has rendered refugee protection a challenge for the state and its partner organizations (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). Shocks such as Cyclone Idai, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war between Russia and Ukraine have worsened this precarious situation. Additionally, these shocks have worsened the country's macroeconomic environment, significantly shrinking the economy (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022; UNDP, 2020). Macroeconomic instability activates subtle inequalities between different population groups in a country (Crawley, 2021; Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). Given that Zimbabwe's deep economic crisis has been protracted, it has gradually eroded the state's ability to provide social protection to its citizens by crippling economic production and growth and decreased public budgets, plunging the country into a deep quandary characterized by high unemployment rates (Chikanda and Crush, 2016; Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). In the process, refugees and other persons of concern are relegated to the margins of protection (Crawley, 2021), usually left to depend on the benevolence of donors and humanitarian partners to provide services. This demonstrates the struggles around mobility justice in the state's responses to shocks and the influx of refugees and asylum seekers.

Macroeconomic instability and the resultant shrinking of economies complicate the dynamics of protection by compromising the ability to provide the requisite services to the populations in question. The state and its partners thus fail to provide comprehensive protection in the form of social assistance and access to basic services, livelihoods support, as well as building refugees' capacity for labor-market readiness. Although the refugee regime in Zimbabwe mandates the state to provide protection services to refugees, the macroeconomic reality is the major constraining factor. In essence, shrinking economies adversely affect the provision of protection to refugees, as partners do not have adequate resources to provide durable solutions for the refugees. The economic realities leave effective protection elusive with limited to no solutions in sight (Spiegel and Mhlanga, 2022). Although the UNHCR and its partners may make efforts to provide protection, they become overwhelmed by the needs load that entails provision of housing, enhancing livelihoods, ensuring food security, provision of water and sanitation services as well as public health systems. These are resource-intensive needs that may not be fully sustained through donor funding. Thus, the inability of the state to contribute resources toward the protection of refugees complicates the dynamics of protection, leaving refugees in perpetual vulnerability and partners operating in emergency mode. Thus, even though Zimbabwe's refugee regime accords the protection mandate to the state, the protracted

economic crisis in the country has crippled the state's ability to do so. Therefore, this study recommends that the government increases its efforts in seeking humanitarian international assistance with favorable conditions. In addition, the government and its strategic partners must explore innovative financing mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of protection efforts. Lastly, the government and its strategic partners must increase their efforts toward programs and bilateral agreements that promote regional cooperation to ensure better protection outcomes for refugees in the region.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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