

# **Living on the Edge: A Reflection on the Survival Strategies of Rural Teachers in the 2005-2008 Economic Depression of Zimbabwe**

by

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## **Abstract**

Between 2000 and 2008, an economic depression swept through Zimbabwe that tremendously shook the education sector, leaving teachers mercilessly exposed. A number of teachers left formal employment and either went into the diaspora or joined the attractive and speculative informal sector. Surprisingly, many teachers in rural areas remained in their jobs, but engaged in other activities in order to fend for and feed their families. This exposition outlines survival strategies that rural teachers adopted in order to earn a living. The study is inspired by structuration theory which hinges on the premise that human beings are social animals who always find some means and ways to deal with their environment. The study made use of the survey research design, and it was discovered that through pursuit of a hand-to-mouth life, teachers managed to scrap through the trying times. Nevertheless, they paid a heavy price as society negatively portrayed them and their profession.

## **Introduction**

The economic depression which swept through Zimbabwe between 2005 and 2008 tremendously affected the education sector. Many teachers in urban and peri-urban areas left their jobs for the diaspora or joined the informal sector. Surprisingly, many rural teachers held fort. They remained in their jobs, but engaged in a number of economic activities to earn a living. It was unfortunate that the activities in which many engaged greatly tainted their image and that of the teaching profession.

While many teachers, particularly in urban and peri-urban centres left their jobs in droves, many rural teachers remained in their jobs. They did not leave their jobs to join the ‘gold rush’ in the diaspora or the illegal informal sector where many urban-based teachers slid into. Questions therefore arise as to why they remained in their unrewarding jobs and how they managed to fend for and feed themselves and their families during the period of the economic depression. This study aims at establishing how rural teachers in Zimbabwe managed to survive at a time when the majority of urban teachers and other urban workers left their unrewarding jobs to pursue other interests. In pursuance of this aim, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

- What made a number of rural teachers hold on to their jobs during this period?
- What economic activities did they engage in to earn a living?
- What was the socio-economic status of teachers during this period?

This study was based on the assumption that there was more to it than what met the eye that enabled rural teachers to survive. Hence, the resilience shown by rural teachers helped to sustain the country and to avoid total collapse. Had everyone given up, the country could have ground to a halt. Such resilience saw some schools remain open. This show of commitment to national duty deserves special study for its neglect would result in scholars and researchers guilty of the error of omission by failing to tell the full Zimbabwean story. Apart from Chagonda, (Chagonda: 2010) who noted that during the peak of the Zimbabwean crisis in 2008, the teaching sector almost collapsed as many teachers left their jobs, very few studies have focused on the impact of the economic depression on teachers. This study thus treads on almost virgin ground and as a result, contributes immensely to knowledge. The study will help government in general and the Ministry of Education in particular to focus on how to cushion their employees against extreme hardships. It should be noted that the neglect of one’s workers to such levels as portrayed in this study tarnishes the image of the teaching profession as well as the image of the government.

Many economic activities adopted by rural teachers during the period 2005 to 2008 constituted economic crimes against the government. As such, some potential respondents desisted from taking part in the study, even though respondents’ anonymity had been guaranteed. There were chances that respondents who participated in the study still concealed some information for fear of reprisals by government authorities. Data collection was a challenge since information was solicited from a widely-scattered population. To counteract this limitation, some questionnaires were sent and received online and some interviews were held using the telephone. This study was restricted to survival skills and strategies of rural teachers in the Chipinge district. The study excluded teachers from the Chipinge and other urban centres. Chipinge is a district in the Manicaland province of Zimbabwe, on the border with Mozambique, a border that stretches over 100 kilometres from Tamandayi in the north to Makoho in the south.

This research was guided by structuration theory. As Nhodo, Maunganidze, Gukurume, Nyamubarwa and Marimba (2013) argue, the theory holds that human beings are social animals and are capable of adapting to their environment. They argue that human beings are not blank slates, but are rational and calculative and have the capacity to define and redefine their social environment until the environment becomes comfortable for them. Survival strategies which teachers adopted during the economic depression were thus a direct response to the social and economic environment that they found themselves in.

## **The Socio-Economic Environment**

During the period of 2005 to 2008, Zimbabwe experienced one of its worst economic depressions in history. According to Gukurume (2012) and Kairiza (2012), inflation peaked a historic 231 million percent, unemployment soared above 80 percent, basic goods disappeared from shops and so did the much sought-after foreign currency. A number of people left formal employment as wages were rendered virtually useless. For example, according to Chagonda (2010), a teacher's salary of Z\$729 million in 2008 was equivalent to US\$0.72 on the parallel market! And according to Chagonda (2010), a number of teachers migrated to other countries, notably South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique, Namibia, Britain, Australia and America. He further asserts that a study conducted by the Scientific and Industrial Research Development Centre in 2004 which covered 532,609 professional Zimbabweans in South Africa, the United Kingdom, Botswana, the United States and Canada, found that teachers constituted the largest group of migrants, which was 26 percent of all the migrants. Using estimates by the Progressive Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association, Chagonda (2010) claims that between 2000 and 2008, about 45000 teachers had left the profession and migrated to other countries.

## **Common Informal Activities Adopted by Urban Teachers**

During the period of 2005 to 2008, a number of teachers in urban and peri-urban areas left their jobs to engage in informal jobs. Some of these activities were foreign currency exchange, sale of fuel and basic commodities and 'money-burning' (Gukurume: 2010, Chagonda 2010 and Gono: 2006). Most of these activities were illegal and largely speculative. Hence, there was so much speculation in the country that Gono (the former Governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe) in 2008 labeled the Zimbabwean economy as 'the casino economy' (Gono: 2008: 10). While banks did not have the hard currency, the opposite was true of illegal informal businesspeople. Foreign currency that was procured through different means was sold at very high rates, normally above bank rates (Gukurume: 2010). According to the *Living Zimbabwe* (2008), US\$1 with a bank exchange rate of Z\$30 000 could be exchanged on the parallel market at a rate of Z\$2 180 000 000. Thus, thousands of teachers, including women joined in this lucrative trade in different parts of the country.

A phenomenon that came to be called “money-burning” also took its toll. According to *The Zimbabwean* (20 November 2008), ‘money burning’ referred to the exchange and sale of foreign currency originally by Real Time Gross Settlement or Inter-Account Transfers, and later, through the check system. According to the *Living Zimbabwe* (2008) people cashed in on the difference between the cash rate and check rate of hard currencies. As metaphorically put forward by *The Zimbabwean* (20 November 2008), profits from “burning money” were so huge that US\$1 was enough to convert to Zimbabwe dollars and pay a month’s salary for the whole civil service!

As early as 2002, the illegal informal sector took it upon themselves to supply and price fuel. Despite the government’s liberalization of fuel trade in July 2005, supply failed to match demand. People began to look for fuel, not at service stations, but on the illegal market. According to *Irin News* (2013), even renowned organizations like the Harare City Council in 2005 admitted that they were buying fuel on the illegal market, for them to keep going. Some service stations sold large quantities of fuel on the underground market, where they evaded government price controls. *The Herald* (17 June 2005) reported that 13957 liters of petrol and 8271 liters of diesel were recovered from the illegal market sale in Shurugwi in 2005.

Lastly, smuggling of basic goods into the country was rife. In his work “Women without borders”, Muzvidziwa (2005), holds that women were the major culprits here. They virtually replaced supermarket chains which by then had the notoriety of lining up their shelves with tissue paper and protector condom boxes. Unfortunately, most of the imported goods were smuggled, and hence the basis for a brush with the immigration and revenue authorities.

## **Enter Dollarization**

It was in the midst of such economic mess that the country dollarized in February 2009 and officially shelved the Zimbabwe dollar in March 2009 (Chagonda: 2010). According to Schuler (2005), dollarization is a situation whereby a country has no locally issued currency and officially uses the currencies of other countries and the currency need not necessarily be the United States dollar. Zimbabwe adopted the use of multiple currencies namely the United States dollar, the Botswana Pula, the British Pound and South African Rand (Chagonda: 2010, Nhodo: 2013 and Kairiza: 2012). As noted by Chagonda (2010), with dollarization the education sector began to show signs of re-composition and resuscitation. He argues that the allowance of US\$100 paid to all government workers (regardless of grade) as from February 2009 to May 2010 brought some semblance of economic stability. Many workers including teachers could now afford some decent meals as well as brag in public that they were indeed ‘salaried’ government employees.

## **Research Methodology**

This qualitative study made use of the survey research design. This design was chosen because it is a good instrument for acquiring information about characteristics, opinions, attitudes or experiences of people (Babbie and Mouton: 2001). Teachers from all the 153 rural primary and secondary schools in Chipinge district comprised the population under study in this research. Seventeen rural schools (11percent) were randomly selected from the 153 rural primary and secondary schools in the district. Fifty teachers from the targeted 85 completed questionnaires. (See Table 1 below). Simple random sampling was used because with it, each item in the population has the same chance of being selected as part of the sample as any other item, thus making it a very reliable and authentic sampling method (Westfall: 2008).

Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data from the targeted sample. Eighty-five questionnaires were distributed to rural teachers in the Chipinge district. Questionnaires were chosen because they are easy to distribute to a large population and they often allow for anonymity (Babbie and Mouton: 2001). As well, they are easy to encode and tabulate (Evans: 1988). Interviews were held with 10 heads of the selected schools. The 10 school heads were randomly selected from the 17 schools. Interviews were chosen as a research instrument because they have a high response rate, they give the researcher room to probe and they can also be configured to generate various types of information (Babbie and Mouton: 2001). Respondents' voluntary participation was sought. They were assured of confidentiality and that the research was being carried out for academic purposes only. Questionnaires were then distributed to the targeted respondents and collected three weeks later. Interviews were held with 10 heads of schools. While six interviews were held at their respective schools, three were held online and one through the telephone. Data was presented in prose format as well as on tables, in graphs, and analyzed using content analysis. And last, quantitative data was analyzed using statistical measures, notably numbers, frequencies and percentages.

## **Results Presentation and Interpretation Respondents' Bio-Data**

The study initially targeted 85 teachers, with 5 targeted from each of the 17 schools. However, 50 questionnaires were completed and returned to the researcher, making a response rate of 59 percent. Below is a table which shows information about the informants.

**Table 1: Questionnaire respondents (n = 50)**

Name of school	Category				Total
	Primary		Secondary		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Mount Selinda	2	3	3	2	<b>10</b>
Zona	3	1	4	1	<b>9</b>
Beacon Hill	4	0	2	1	<b>7</b>
Chimana	2	-	-	-	<b>2</b>
Tamandayi	1	1	-	-	<b>2</b>
Muumbe	1	1	2	1	<b>5</b>
Mariya	2	1	2	1	<b>6</b>
Zamchiya	1	2	1	0	<b>4</b>
Mabee	2	1	1	1	<b>5</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>50</b>

### Why Rural Teachers Remained

All questionnaire respondents as well as all interviewees dispelled the notion that they did not leave their jobs because of their commitment to serving their country. A number of reasons were advanced to explain why many of them held on to their jobs. Fourteen informants (28 percent) held that they did not leave their jobs because they owned land and they had some livestock. The same sentiments were expressed by 4 of the 10 interviewees who argued that in traditional African society, wealth is measured in terms of land and cattle. They expounded that a number of the mature rural teachers owned land and some livestock and engaged in subsistence farming. Thus, when the economy went on a free fall, a number of rural teachers were covered to some extent.

Seven teachers (14 percent) held that they neither owned land nor livestock, but still held on to their jobs. They stated that remaining in their jobs was initially a result of procrastination and fear of the unknown and later it was because of their failure to raise money to embark on to foreign lands. By the time they thought of jumping the border to neighboring countries, screws on illegal border jumping had been tightened. One school head expressed in an interview that border jumping was not only risky, but it was also expensive. He stated that by the time the crisis reached its climax in 2008, many teachers could not raise R200 (about US\$20) for bus fare to South Africa and a further R200 for *Mahomucha* (specialist border jumping assistants). For them, staying put was the only available option.

Six teachers (12 percent) stated that they held on to their jobs because of a rather cheaper lifestyle in rural areas, particularly with regard to free accommodation as opposed to their counterparts in the urban areas. Teachers in rural areas are normally housed free of charge by their schools, and some mature teachers normally had their own homes in the vicinity of their schools.

Three school heads who were interviewed expressed that the issue of accommodation drew a significant difference between rural and urban teachers. They expounded that the issue of free accommodation did not put too much pressure on rural teachers. In towns, the story was quite different. Many teachers in towns are lodgers. Before the adoption of dollarization, house rentals in towns were as from 2006 paid in foreign currency, whilst teachers were still being salaried in the local Zimbabwe currency. At the height of the economic recession in 2008, some landlords preferred being paid in kind for example in the form of cooking oil, soap, sugar and mealie-meal. This form of payment was a major push factor for the urban teacher.

One informant (2 percent) expressed that she was confident that the economic meltdown was temporary and strongly believed that it would soon be over. As a result, she decided to hold on to her job, with the hope that there would soon be divine intervention. She cited the case of Mozambique where economic hardships pressed down the general populace in the 1980s, but the situation brightened in the 1990s.

### **Economic Activities that Rural Teachers Engaged in to Earn a Living**

Twenty-two informants (44 percent) held that they held on to their jobs because they engaged in a number of informal activities alongside their not-rewarding jobs. These activities are shown on the table below:

**Table 2: Informal activities rural teachers engaged in between 2005 and 2008 (n = 22)**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Sale of second hand clothes	4	18
Export trade	8	36
Import trade	5	23
Village butcheries	3	14
Cross border purchase agents	2	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>

## **Sale of Second-Hand Clothes (*Mabhero*)**

Four informants (18 percent) specialized in the buying and selling of second-hand clothes, popularly known in Zimbabwe as “mabhero” or “mazitye”. *Mabhero* is the Shona equivalence for “bales” and so labeled since second-hand clothes were procured from Chimoio (Mozambique) in bales. A bale was worth around 2000 Meticais (the Mozambican currency), which was about South African R600. Common second hand clothes in bales included shoes, bras, dresses, shirts, jackets and trousers. Two rural teachers even established flea markets at Espungabera, Mozambique, where they sold their wares. The rest smuggled their bales into Zimbabwe where they were sold at popular markets like at Mundanda, Tamandayi, Mabee and Chako. *Mabhero* business also made a good kill on “*musi wa 2*”, the day tea workers are paid on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of every month, hence the coining *musi wa 2* with Chipinge district as the hub of tea plantations (e.g., Zona, Jersey, Rattleshoek and Aventura). Thus, during such paydays, sale of second hand clothes was a lucrative business.

Second hand clothes were sold in foreign currency or through the barter system. The most preferred currencies were meticais, rands and US dollars. Items most preferred in barter trade were mealie-meal, sugar, soap, grain and cooking oil. Hence, an interviewee added that not many teachers could join this trade because the entry capital (South African R600 – 1000) was rather out of reach for many of them. The trade was also a bit risky as bales were procured at Chimoio, the Mozambican capital of the province of Manica. For one to get there, one had to have a passport or a pass and had to have a working knowledge of Portuguese, and cases of being duped by the Mozambican wholesalers or their agents were not uncommon, especially due to linguistic challenges.

## **Export Trade**

Until February 2009, teachers’ salaries were paid in Zimbabwe dollars. This was despite the fact that they had to buy almost everything in foreign currency. Thus, eight informants (36 percent) held that they engaged in export of local products to Mozambique in order to source foreign currency. And one interviewee held that many male teachers who engaged in subsistence farming could sell their cattle, goats and grain in Mozambique where they obtained foreign currency which enabled them to raise money to buy basic goods for their families.

The agricultural sector along the border with Mozambique also received a major boost with the coming of *Makorofiya*. According to one informant, *Makorofiya* were Indian businessmen who operated along the border but based in Mozambique. They bought cattle and cotton at very handsome prices, which at times were ten times what local buyers paid in foreign currency, thus, some teachers joined the bandwagon, either as middlemen or sellers.



The *Makorofiya* trade was more pronounced in the southern parts of Chipinge district, where Chingove, a Mozambican town adjacent to Mabee, was the epicenter of the trade. Thus, teachers from schools like Mabee, Zamchiya and Mariya reaped handsome rewards from the export trade.

Women also smuggled less-bulky goods like potato chips, tea leaves, sterilized milk and biscuits items which were the elite's favorites (e.g., '*vana Madam Dona Maria*' at hospitals and schools). However, such trade was not without its own challenges. According to one interviewee, Zimbabwean women at times sold their wares on credit. Some unscrupulous customers deliberately refused to pay them and instead set the Mozambican policemen upon them. It should be noted that these women were unlicensed and had notoriety for jumping the border when engaging in their business. One informant claimed that the smuggling of goods into Mozambique was greatly enhanced by Mozambicans' ever-escalating taste for Zimbabwean goods. For example, Mozambique has her own brand of sugar and beer. However, they preferred more of Zimbabwean sugar as well as opaque and clear beer. And even Zimbabwean tomatoes were a hit at towns like Espungabera and Chingove. Bulky goods like crates of beer, boxes of sterilized milk and cartons of sugar were normally smuggled by men.

Some teachers were by 2009 known suppliers of Mozambican spalazas (small shops). These goods were smuggled during the dead of night. It takes about an hour's walk to get to Espungabera from Mount Selinda and about two hour's walk to get to Chingove from Mabee. Thus, there was ample time for the teachers to get back to their schools and attend to their formal duties. It must also be realized that during this time, serious teaching and learning had waned. Even if teachers were late for work or absent, no alarm bells were ever rang. This was especially because some schools, especially in urban and peri-urban areas had closed and no one was very concerned about a teacher who was absent for a day or two. Again, there was a lack of supervision since the supervisors were also out to fend for themselves and their families.

## **Import Trade**

By 2008, most basic commodities like cooking oil, soap, rice, mealie-meal, flour, petrol and fish were hard to find in Zimbabwe. However, the products were readily available in Mozambican towns like Espungabera and Chingove. Import of basic products thus became lucrative business. Five teachers (23 percent) claimed to have made a name for themselves as importers of basic commodities, especially from Mozambique, and sometimes from South Africa. While some products were brought into the country through formal entry points, the bulk of the goods were smuggled.

One school head who was interviewed claimed that a quota was set on big imports like a 25 kilogram bag of rice and a 20 kilogram bag of flour at the Mozambican immigration checkpoint, thus, the maximum import per entry for flour and rice was 20 kilograms.

For one to import such goods in bigger quantities, one had to have an extra 20 to 100 Meticaais for *Agora* (Mozambican policemen) as a bribe. This led to the proliferation of smuggling of imports into Zimbabwe. However, smugglers risked losing all their goods if they were intercepted by Mozambican immigration and police officers as well as Zimbabwean policemen, who by then had developed notoriety for seizing undeclared goods, for personal benefit. As well, by using undesignated entry and exit points, Zimbabweans risked a life or limb as the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border was heavily mine-infested since the days of colonial rule. Common and small imports included soap, fish, cooking oil and spirits. These were usually procured by women after selling their wares or after collecting payments from debtors. Under normal circumstances, immigration authorities from either side were not bothered by the quantity and value of such small items.

### **Village Butcheries**

Three teachers (14 percent) revealed that they sustained themselves and their families by running village butcheries. These butcheries were a cheap form of business as they were not licensed and one did not need to construct a building from where to operate. Being under a tree, it was easy for the butcher-men to quickly disband and disappear at the approach of policemen. As one interviewee explained, such village butcheries prospered more than real butcheries. The commonest products on the village butcheries were goat meat, pork and beef. While real butcheries could not legally sell in foreign currency, village butcheries did. Policemen frequently scooped on unsuspecting real butcheries which sold their goods in foreign currency (village butcheries were common in Mabee, Mariya, Muembe, Zamchiya and Mwangazi).

### **South African Cross-border Visa Agents**

In order to earn a living, 2 teachers (9 percent) assumed the status of cross-border visa agents for local businesspeople. Before 2009, South Africa imposed a visa of R2000 (for a period of 6 months) on Zimbabweans wishing to enter into South Africa. This requirement was waived in the case of government workers. All that government workers had to do was to produce pay-slips alongside their passports to prove that they were civil servants. During the height of the Messinah-import madness, businesspeople had to cross into South Africa almost every week to procure basic products which sold well in Zimbabwe. Messinah is a town in South Africa close to the Zimbabwe-South Africa border, where most Zimbabweans imported basic goods like mealie-meal, cooking oil, soap, sugar and rice. Many businesspeople made use of teachers to procure for them goods from South Africa in return for some payment. Many teachers who had passports cashed in on this deal as they boarded buses to South Africa on Friday, did their shopping on Saturday, came back home on Sunday, and by Monday morning, they were in their classrooms delivering lessons to half-attentive, hungry and impoverished students.

## **The Socio-Economic Status of Rural Teachers**

During the period of the economic recession, the socio-economic status of teachers plummeted to an all-time low. Teachers had hitherto been seen as the light of society in the rural areas. One informant, who was in his late forties, commented that in the 1980s and 1990s;

Teaching used to be a noble profession. Everyone wanted to be associated with a teacher. It was common for a teacher to receive gifts from villagers if he went through the village, as a token of appreciation for the role they played in society. Now, teachers are seen as destitutes...

All of a sudden, teachers were looked at with disdain and are lowly placed in social stratification. During the Chiadzwa days (the height of the illegal mining activities at Marange diamond fields), “makorokoza” (illegal miners) was a slogan for those who had failed to make a good kill for the day to chant “nhasi ndiri ticha chaiye” (today I am like a teacher). Uneducated hoodlums could also be heard taunting teachers in bars “Tohudzasa isu maGrade 7, maticha akati vavava” (we the uneducated are having too many beers while teachers are without and watching us admiringly). Teachers thus, became rural communities’ standard measure of moneylessness, poverty, despair and hopelessness. Hence, the labeling of teachers as the poor in society had a negative impact on the education of children during the era. For many students, it did not make much sense for one to strive to acquire some decent education as the learned “professors of the villages” were struggling to make ends meet. One informant concluded that the dawn of dollarization once again put everyone in their proper place. Sanity returned, and the status of teachers as respectable professionals returned as well.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers in Chipinge district lived on the edge during this period. While many of their counterparts in the rest of the inland districts left formal employment and engaged in foreign currency exchange and “money burning”, the rural teachers mostly restricted themselves to their own means of survival. Most of these hinged on Mozambique as a result of the district’s proximity to the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border, a border which is less closely monitored by government authorities than is the case with borders with other countries. Many teachers managed to scrap through the crisis while still reporting for their formal duties at their respective schools. Nevertheless, rural teachers paid a heavy price for “kolkozing” (living a deplorable hand-to-mouth life) as their status in society reached an all-time low, a position they are slowly coming out of following dollarization and the return of the country to economic, financial and social stability.

## Recommendations

The economic down-turn had far reaching consequences that spilled into the post-dollarization era. This study proposes the following measures to save the country from such calamities in the future:

- When faced with economic challenges, the government should put in place robust, long-term and effective macro-economic measures. For example, it should desist from controlling the economy and let free market forces operate. Price controls, for example, by the government of Zimbabwe resulted in hoarding of basic goods, a rise in price of basic goods and subsequently, shortages of these basic goods.
- The government should desist from relying on temporary measures like printing money. Printing money was one major cause of runaway inflation. Measures like dollarization should be quickly relied upon as a short-term solution to turn around economies that are in distress before the situation degenerates to a crisis level.
- The government of Zimbabwe should terminate its hard-line and isolationist stance and improve relations with the international community, monetary institutions and donor agencies.
- There should be extra measures to protect vulnerable rural workers as is done in other countries like Lesotho, Malawi and Mozambique (Adedeji and Olaniyan: 2011) where teachers are given rural or hardship allowances. It should be noted that the rural government worker is a reflection of the government of the day, thus improving their status also enhances the image of the government in the eyes of people in the rural areas, and with the general populace.

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