



# LIVING IN ABSENCE

**ASSESSING THE NEEDS OF THE FAMILIES OF  
MISSING ZIMBABWEAN MIGRANTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

Large numbers of Zimbabwean nationals migrate to South Africa, facing dangers and risks along the route and upon arrival in their destination country. Many lose their lives and are buried unidentified, making it impossible to inform their families of the fate of their loved ones<sup>1</sup>. It is not infrequent for migrants to also involuntarily lose contact with their families and disappear without a trace. There are many reasons for this, including illness, injury, detention, trafficking, deportation, a lack of means or access or resources. Some come from rural areas which are extremely isolated, with almost no means of communication. An assessment<sup>2</sup> has shown that migrants hardly ever anticipate or prepare for the possibility of being separated.

The families of missing migrants suffer from immense emotional distress as a result of not knowing what has happened to their loved ones; many of them are left with a sense of ambiguous loss, as the uncertainty hinders them from grieving and moving forward. The anguish due to the lack of closure can last for decades, affecting not only families, but entire communities. Furthermore, families must deal with practical concerns, such as the loss of a breadwinner or discrimination, until the fate of their relative is established. In the case of death, repatriations and burial rights cannot be conducted, and families and communities cannot mourn at their traditional burial site.

Having noted the scale of needs among missing migrants' families in the region, the ICRC launched a pilot project in 2016, and with the support of the authorities in the Zaka and Gwanda Districts, started collecting personal information from families of missing persons to assist in their search in South Africa, whether alive or dead. The pilot project proved successful in identifying Zimbabwean migrants alive and increasing the identification rate of unknown bodies in the main government mortuary of Johannesburg. It was expanded to a program in 2020.

In 2020, the ICRC further undertook a comprehensive Family Needs Assessment (FNA) among the families of missing Zimbabwean migrants as part of this program. The aim of the FNA was to better understand the difficulties facing such families, so that the resources available could be evaluated and the necessary recommendations made to authorities and state and non-state actors including government stakeholders at the national, provincial and community levels, non-governmental organizations, etc. with a view to bridging the gap between needs and resources.

<sup>1</sup> 4 000 to 7 000 unidentified bodies are buried annually in South Africa, most of them presumably belonging to foreigners.

<sup>2</sup> Restoring Family Links Assessment, Migration in Europe, International Committee of the Red Cross, January 2019, External Version, BEL 19/041.

## FAMILY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

This assessment targeted Zimbabwean families whose relatives had gone missing after migrating to South Africa, and who had received no news of their relatives since their departure. Migrants had gone missing between 3 and 25 years.

A sample of 50 cases was drawn from tracing requests registered by the ICRC in the framework of its pilot project in rural areas. Moreover, families of 30 other missing migrants were added from urban sections of Harare and Bulawayo. They were all interviewed individually at their homes. Discussions were also held with actors working on the issue of missing migrants, including authorities, community and religious leaders, and NGOs, in order to support the analysis of the families' needs and related recommendations.

## MAIN FINDINGS

The assessment highlighted the following needs for the families of missing migrants:

### NEED TO KNOW

Vast majority (90%) of families left behind indicated that they need to know the fate and whereabouts of their missing loved ones. 73% of families interviewed have not taken steps to initiate an official search process for their relatives because they do not know whom to contact and where to begin searching for the missing person.

Of the total number of respondents, 69% said it was very important for them to get back the remains of their missing relatives, should they be dead.

*"I have lived for 20 years in uncertainty, not knowing what has happened to my husband. I have suffered for all these years. My two girls have been married in their father's absence; in our culture, it is the father who should perform the marriage rites for his daughters. Our youngest child – I was pregnant with him, had been for six months, when his father left – our youngest child is now grown up and wants to know who his father is. A body, his bones, his grave, official documents saying that he is dead: any of those things would help us find closure."*

*– Missing migrant's wife in Epworth – Harare*

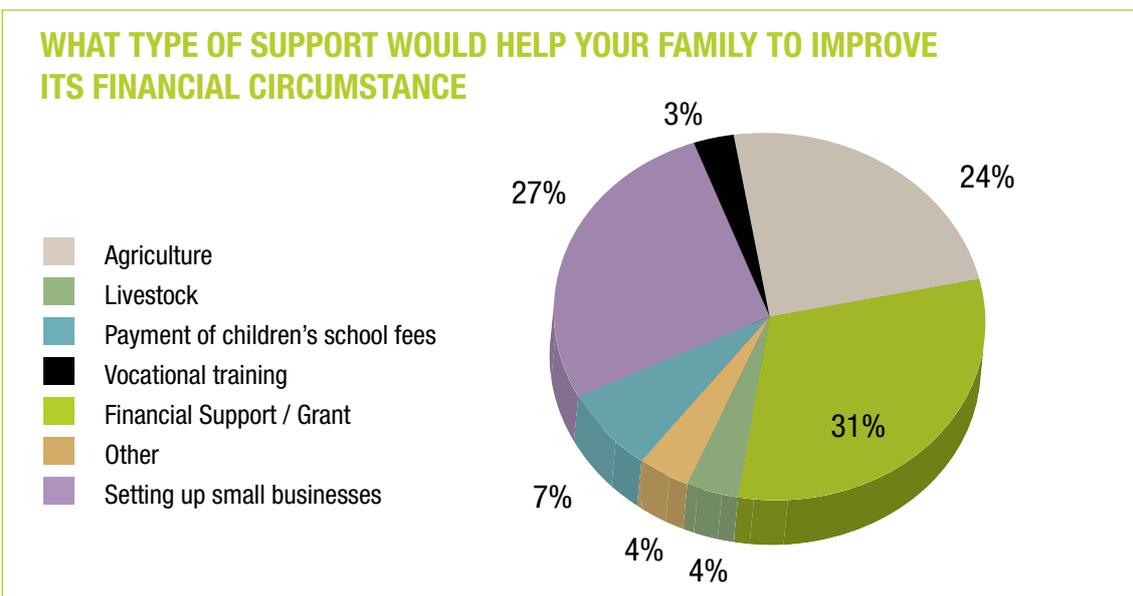
### ECONOMIC NEEDS

Almost two thirds of the families confirmed that they encounter economic and material problems because of the disappearance of their relative. The families explained that they had lost their financial independence. In addition, they said, the absence of their relative had imposed more responsibilities and increased the burden on the family, as there were now fewer people to see to household and other tasks. Those left behind are mostly women and children, who struggle to undertake subsistence agriculture or casual labour to feed and support their families.

*“We have plenty of water for irrigation but there is no manpower to till the land. Look at me, my daughter, I am an old woman and I cannot do manual labour. And I do not have money to hire labour for the irrigation. It’s a double tragedy for me. I depend on members of my community to give me food. All my livestock is gone. I had to sell it to survive.”*

*-Mother of missing migrant in Zaka*

In response to the type of support which would help their family to improve their economic circumstances, most interviewees mentioned financial support/grant and support to set up a small business.



*“If he is still around, please, I want him to come home. Or at least show us his children. Children are very important, if we can at least see his children, we will also be happy,” says Catherine Chikweme from Harare who is looking for her son Prosper.*

## PSYCHOSOCIAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

The study found that 62% of the interviewees replied that it was the absence of their missing relative and the lack of information, and uncertainty, about their fate which was most difficult for them to overcome or deal with. Respondents highlighted a variety of emotional or psychological ailments that can be attributed to the disappearance of their loved one: sadness, tiredness, loneliness, loss of appetite, and loss of interest in daily activities.

*“The absence of my daughter is killing me slowly. I have developed insomnia because I cannot stop thinking about what may have happened to her. Maybe she has been trafficked and is used as a sex slave or maybe she was killed, and her organs sold. We have heard that these things happen in foreign countries.”*

*–Mother of missing migrant*

Of the total number of respondents, 22% stated that their status or importance within the family had decreased since the departure of their missing relatives. It concerned mainly their parents-in-law, who blamed the migration and disappearance of their child on the wife. 24% of the interviewees also mentioned that their relative’s disappearance had badly damaged their relations with friends and neighbours. They claimed that they were despised for their current predicament. 53% of the families interviewed said that they had faced some kind of discrimination since the disappearance of their relative.

About 50% of the families said that talking with someone who was sympathetic, and understanding would make them feel better.

## LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE NEEDS

Some families reported encountering legal and administrative difficulties as a result of their relatives’ disappearance. The families were not aware of the procedures that have to be followed when a relative goes missing. Of the families interviewed, 25% also said that they had run into difficulties caused by the lack of birth certificates for the children of their missing relatives.

*I felt useless when my husband’s relatives refused to help me register the children for birth certificates, which I needed to send the children to school. I could not sleep at night thinking of my children who would be illiterate in this day and age if I did not make a plan. I got advice from other people about registering the children using my surname, and in the end, I did just that. Now it would seem I have children from different fathers, as they use different surnames – because the others have birth certificates with my husband’s surname, and these two have my surname on theirs.”*

*– Wife of missing migrant – Epworth*

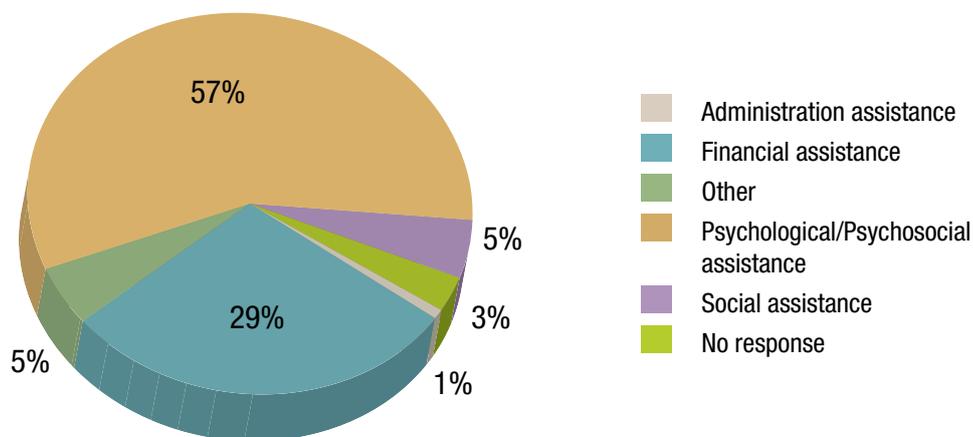
38% of the families said that a document attesting to the disappearance or absence of their relative would be useful.

## NEEDS RELATED TO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Relatives of missing migrants expressed the need to have their plight acknowledged. About 73% of the families said that participating in group or community events related to missing people would help them to deal with the issues created by their relatives' disappearance.

Families explained that receiving assistance would be an acknowledgement of their dire plight, which was the result of their relatives' disappearance. Specifically, 57% of families interviewed indicated the need for psychological/psychosocial assistance in acknowledgement of their difficulties; 29% financial assistance; 5% help for dealing with administrative needs.

### WHAT ACTION WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE TAKEN TO ADDRESS YOUR PROBLEM?



## IOM'S MISSING MIGRANTS PROJECT

Families of missing migrants in Zimbabwe undergo serious challenges in searching for their relatives who have gone missing in the context of migration to South Africa, according to a study published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in August 2021 based on research carried out in Zimbabwe's Manicaland province.

### Searching for missing migrant family members in Zimbabwe

- Many families did not know whom to approach to report the disappearance of their relative.
- The few families who contacted the authorities did not receive meaningful support with their cases.
- When missing relatives had irregular migration status in the country of destination or travelled there irregularly, families faced additional challenges in accessing formal channels to search for them.
- Many families could not afford the costs associated with travelling to search for information or to submit cases.

### Impacts on families left behind

- As a result of not knowing what happened to their relatives, families of missing migrants suffered from long term psychological anguish, including trauma and depression.
- Some families, particularly women, were stigmatized in their communities because of the disappearance of their relative.

- The educational development of children who had a missing parent was negatively impacted.

These findings are part of a broader research project implemented by IOM's Missing Migrants Project. Between April 2019 and March 2021, IOM carried out qualitative research with 76 families of missing migrants in Ethiopia, Spain, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe. Across all countries in the study, families of missing migrants faced similar situations, indicating there is an urgent need for better support for people in this situation. Under Objective 8 of the Global Compact on Migration, States have committed to identifying those who have died or gone missing during migration, and to facilitate communication with affected families. The report on Zimbabwe propose a blueprint for how authorities can develop a uniform response to cases of missing migrants and support their families left behind. Please find it here: [bit.ly/MMPzim](https://bit.ly/MMPzim)

## MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

### COORDINATION AND COOPERATION

It is imperative that authorities and organizations working on missing migrants; families; and host countries where the dead bodies of migrants who went missing are being handled/stored work closely together. State authorities in South Africa and Zimbabwe, and other actors involved in the search for missing migrants, should ensure that families and others can provide information in an accessible, safe and confidential manner. This should include not only well-defined and publicized points of contact but also active information collection efforts.

All actors involved in this undertaking need to be aware of the exceedingly sensitive nature of the migratory context. Many migrants and their families find themselves in situations of vulnerability. Interaction with them, with relevant authorities, and the collection and sharing of information about them may have far-reaching consequences. For this reason, it is crucial that the principle of “do no harm” is at the centre of all actions. This includes, but should not be limited to, having an acute awareness of the risk posed by the misuse of information in a given context and ensuring appropriate data protection and information security.

### ADDRESS THE NEED TO KNOW

1. Establish a state-led, cross-border mechanism to focus on clarifying the fate of missing migrants and informing their families, as well as lobbying for a consolidated regional database of missing migrants for the South African Development Community (SADC). The mechanism should facilitate coordination and enable two-way flow of information between the various actors, allowing information provided by families in Zimbabwe to be sent to search authorities in South Africa, and news of developments in the search, or requests for additional information, to be channeled back to the families.
2. Develop and disseminate publicly and nationwide a clear referral pathway to ensure that the families know whom to approach within the government sector when their relatives go missing.
3. Ensure that personnel at the pertinent institutions know enough about the issue of missing migrants and are given the necessary training. All stakeholders should strive to raise awareness among migrants' families about the processes, measures and institutions that are available to support them in searching for their missing relatives and to address their other needs.



### ADDRESS NEEDS FOR ECONOMIC SUPPORT

1. Disseminate or provide information on the social assistance and benefits available to missing persons' families or the setting up of a referral path to other service providers.

### ADDRESS PSYCHOSOCIAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

1. Recognize the importance of state actors in providing psychological and psychosocial support – through their trained social workers and psychologists – to the families of missing migrants. The Department of Social Services could consider offering mobile counselling services and advice to families in legal, administrative and financial matters, and to give them the location of the service providers nearest to them.
2. Bring families together – urban and rural – by creating a network of families for empowerment, peer education and mutual support.
3. Provide counselling services for families that feel stigmatized and target the root causes of stigmatization through awareness campaigns in the community.

## ADDRESS LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE NEEDS

1. Analyse and consider reviewing the legal framework for addressing the issue of missing persons and the plight of their families in Zimbabwe. Concerning the Missing Persons Act, work on the clarification of the relevant terms in the legislation (such as ‘missing persons’, and ‘relatives’), a list of the rights – clearly defined – of missing persons and their families, provisions ensuring the states obligation to investigate disappearances and search for missing persons, and the creation of a mechanism to maintain up-to-date data on all missing Zimbabwean nationals.
2. Consider revising the current administrative rules for acquiring birth certificates and other documents, to enable families of missing migrants to acquire the necessary documentation, and to have access to government benefits they are entitled to.
3. Draft a comprehensive list of and address the administrative needs of the families of missing migrants through a survey.

## ADDRESS NEEDS RELATED TO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

1. Recognize publicly the issue of missing migrants and acknowledge the suffering of the families.
2. Assist the families in preserving the memories of their loved ones. To that end, special events can be organized for them – for example, to mark the International Day of the Disappeared – at which they should be given an opportunity to describe and share their experiences.

Consulting the families when making decisions that affect them is crucial: they know their difficulties better than anyone else.





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