

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: UNDERSTANDING INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESSES IN PROTECTING MIGRANT CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

Despite Zimbabwe's commitment to international child rights instruments, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (1990), the protection of children on the move remains inconsistent and poorly enforced. This study examines the policy, legal and institutional shortcomings that undermine child protection for migrant and unaccompanied children in Zimbabwe. Using a qualitative document analysis approach, the research reviews national laws, policy frameworks, institutional reports and regional conventions to assess the alignment between policy intent and practice. The findings reveal weak policy enforcement, fragmented institutional mandates, inadequate funding and a lack of coordination. The study recommends that strong legislative reform, policy coherence, institutional capacity building, community integration with strong cross-border cooperation, monitoring and evaluation measures should be implemented to address institutional gaps pertaining migrant children on the move.

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INTRODUCTION

Child migration in Zimbabwe has become a significant social and protection issue. Once seen as an adult phenomenon, migration now increasingly involves children, many of whom are unaccompanied or separated from caregivers (Gonzalez, 2013). This implies that migration is no longer something that children merely experience because adults move, rather, children are now initiating, navigating and surviving migration journeys on their own. This challenges already existing policies which focus on adult migrants. According to UNICEF (2023), over 43 million children are displaced globally and Zimbabwe is contributing a growing share due to economic hardship, political instability and environmental stressors. In Southern Africa, Zimbabwe serves as both a country of origin and transit, with many children crossing into South Africa and Botswana (Save the Children, 2021). Despite ratifying key international conventions and enacting domestic laws, the protection system remains fragmented. This lack of coordination leads to inconsistent identification, screening and referral of migrant children, suggesting that many go unnoticed or untreated. This study critically examines the disconnection between policy and practice in Zimbabwe's child protection framework.

This study aligns with Zimbabwe's national development agenda as outlined in Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1). Both documents emphasize the importance of human capital development and social protection as foundations for sustainable growth. Child protection, especially for vulnerable and mobile populations, is central to achieving these goals. This

research provides evidence-based recommendations to strengthen institutional systems that safeguard children in transit and support their reintegration.

Despite Zimbabwe's long-standing commitment to child welfare, there has been limited scholarly focus on how institutional structures implement policy commitments related to migration governance. Existing studies have examined primarily the causes of child migration or the dynamics of trafficking, with little emphasis on how the state's institutional capacity affects protection outcomes. This gap justifies the current study's exploration of institutional weaknesses as the critical connection between policy intentions and practical implementation.

The significance of this study lies in two main areas. First, it contributes to national and regional discussions on migration and child protection by offering a governance-based analytical perspective. Second, it provides actionable insights that can help design more resilient and accountable protection systems aligned with both global conventions and national development frameworks.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by two complementary frameworks: the Child Rights Approach (CRA) and the Vulnerability-Resilience Theory. Both frameworks shed light on the policy, legal and institutional challenges affecting the protection of children on the move in Zimbabwe.

The Child Rights Approach is grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the African

Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990). It conceptualises children as active rights-holders and states as duty-bearers with a legal and moral obligation to ensure protection, participation and provision (UNICEF, 2023). In migration contexts, the CRA demands that state institutions translate international commitments into enforceable national laws and administrative mechanisms. However, in Zimbabwe, the gap between ratification and implementation remains vast. This is evident in outdated statutes such as the Children's Act (Chapter 5:06), which does not explicitly address the rights of migrant or undocumented children. Thus, this theoretical lens enables a normative assessment of how far policy and legal instruments align with child rights principles, namely non-discrimination, best interests of the child, survival and development and participation. It underscores that institutional failure to implement protective measures constitutes a violation of children's rights, not merely a policy weakness.

The Vulnerability Resilience Theory, derived from disaster risk and child development studies (Chambers, 1989; Ungar, 2013), posits that children's exposure to harm depends on the interplay between risk factors (such as displacement, poverty and lack of institutional support) and protective factors (such as access to education, social networks and legal safeguards). In the context of Zimbabwe's child migration, vulnerability is exacerbated by weak coordination among institutions, limited social services and inadequate legal protection mechanisms. Conversely, resilience emerges when formal and informal systems, including community-based protection structures, NGOs and family networks, provide adaptive support. This theory helps explain

why some children on the move experience compounded risks, while others manage to cope or recover, depending on the institutional environment. It highlights that resilience is not just an individual attribute, but a socially constructed process enabled or constrained by policy and institutional arrangements.

Together, these frameworks provide a dual analytical lens: the Child Rights Approach examines the normative and legal obligations of the state and institutions, while the Vulnerability Resilience Theory interprets how institutional and community mechanisms influence children's capacity to cope with migration risks. The integration of these perspectives allows the study to assess both structural accountability (policy and legal compliance) and functional effectiveness (institutional performance and community engagement) in protecting children on the move in Zimbabwe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration involving children has become a significant global concern. Scholars such as Fremantle and Clacherty (2023) define children on the move as those who migrate either voluntarily or involuntarily within or across borders, with or without caregivers. While their movement can create opportunities, it also exposes them to heightened risks of abuse, neglect and exploitation. In Zimbabwe and the broader Southern African region, child migration has intensified due to poverty, family separation, economic instability and climate-related shocks (Gwenzi *et al.*, 2016; Save the Children, 2021). Many of these children migrate irregularly, often through unsafe border crossings into South

Africa, Botswana and Mozambique, seeking survival rather than opportunity.

Comparative studies from the Southern African region suggest that Zimbabwe's challenges align with broader regional trends, offering an opportunity for learning and improvement. For instance, Botswana's National Child Protection Strategy (2022) has effectively implemented structured referral mechanisms among police, immigration and social welfare departments to support unaccompanied minors better. Similarly, South Africa's Children's Act (2005) establishes inter-sectoral committees and cross-border guardianship protocols, which facilitate smoother repatriation and ensure continuity in care. In this context, Zimbabwe's National Migration Policy (2020), while still primarily declarative, presents a significant opportunity for growth by integrating operational provisions and guidelines for child-specific migration cases. This comparison showcases the potential for aligning regional policy ideals with local practice.

Moreover, regional frameworks such as the SADC Migration Policy Framework (2020) encourage harmonised protection, but their voluntary nature highlights the need for strong domestic institutional capacity and political commitment to enforce them effectively. By addressing these institutional challenges, Zimbabwe can take meaningful steps towards translating international and regional commitments into tangible protection for vulnerable populations. This constructive approach could lead to enhanced child protection measures and greater cooperation across borders in the region.

Despite the scale of this phenomenon, discussions around migration in Africa have focused largely on adults. Singleton,

Black and Luckzo (2018) argue that child mobility is frequently subsumed under general migration trends, leading to limited policy attention on the unique vulnerabilities of children. This lack of a disaggregated understanding reinforces institutional invisibility of migrant children and their unique protection needs, resulting in weak protective responses and results in weak protective responses.

International and regional frameworks, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC, 1990), outline the state's duty to ensure protection, participation and provision for all children, including those affected by migration. However, empirical evidence indicates that ratification alone has not translated into effective national implementation (Betancourt, 2011; UNICEF, 2023). At the regional level, the SADC Migration Policy Framework (2020) and the AU Common Position on Migration and Development (2018) encourage member states to integrate child protection into migration governance. Yet, as Rodet and Razy (2016) observe, most African policies continue to treat migrating children as passive victims, rather than active agents embedded within kinship and social networks. This conceptual gap leads to protective frameworks that often overlook local cultural dynamics and the socio-economic contexts driving child migration.

Zimbabwe's legal and policy environment shows both progress and fragmentation. Key legal instruments such as the Children's Act (Chapter 5:06) and the Trafficking in Persons Act (2014) provide mandates for child protection. However, these laws are largely reactive and outdated, lacking explicit provisions for cross-

border child protection, safe repatriation and prevention of statelessness. The National Child Policy (2019) and the National Migration Policy (2020) acknowledge vulnerable groups but fail to specifically address the needs of migrant and unaccompanied minors. Mhlanga (2018) highlights that although Zimbabwe has ratified major international conventions, practical implementation remains weak due to limited inter-ministerial coordination and insufficient budgetary allocation. Moreover, the lack of harmonisation between statutory and customary child protection systems further undermines enforcement, especially in rural and border areas.

Similarly, Mundau and Chikowe (2023) observe that while foster care services exist for unaccompanied children in border towns like Beitbridge, their effectiveness is hampered by poor institutional support, minimal community engagement and chronic underfunding. This observation is consistent with Save the Children (2021), which reports that Zimbabwe's child protection mechanisms often depend on external donors and lack sustainable state ownership. Therefore, Zimbabwe's child protection system is structurally weak, resulting in unreliable and fragmented protection for vulnerable migrant children, leading to a significant risk due to the absence of stable government-led protection mechanisms.

Institutional fragmentation is one of the most recurring challenges in Zimbabwe's child protection landscape. Crush, Chikanda and Tawodzera (2015) note that weak governance structures, poor inter-agency collaboration and limited data sharing, hinder coordinated migration management across Southern Africa. This institutional weakness is mirrored in Zimbabwe, where ministries

responsible for child protection, immigration and social welfare, often operate in isolation. Reports by IOM (2011; 2022) and UNICEF (2017; 2020) reveal that border management systems lack dedicated, child-friendly facilities and adequately trained staff to handle child migration cases. Case documentation and referral systems remain largely manual, compromising monitoring and accountability. This lack of institutional coherence results in inconsistent service delivery and minimal follow-up for children intercepted or repatriated during migration.

Two theoretical frameworks are particularly influential in explaining these patterns. The Child Rights Approach views children as rights holders and states as duty-bearers responsible for operationalising protection through concrete laws, policies and services (Ennew, 2008; Hanson and Nieuwenhuys, 2013; UNICEF, 2023). The persistent implementation gap in Zimbabwe thus represents a failure of state accountability rather than mere resource limitations. Complementing this is the Vulnerability Resilience Theory, developed by Chambers (1989) and Ungar (2013), which interprets child protection as an adaptive process.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative document analysis design to examine the policy and institutional frameworks that influence the protection of children on the move in Zimbabwe. This approach was selected because it enabled a systematic review and interpretation of existing written materials such as laws, policy papers, institutional reports and international conventions to identify how child protection is conceptualised, structured and implemented. Qualitative document analysis was particularly appropriate since the study aims to understand gaps in policy and

institutional frameworks rather than gather new empirical data from human participants.

The analysis focused on two main categories of documentary sources:

Primary Documents: These consisted of legal and policy instruments issued directly by the Government of Zimbabwe, regional and international bodies. Key documents included the Children's Act (Chapter 5:06), the Trafficking in Persons Act (2014), the National Child Policy (2019), the National Migration Policy (2020), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) and the SADC Migration Policy Framework (2020).

Secondary Documents: This category included institutional and evaluation reports from organisations such as UNICEF, IOM, Save the Children and the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, as well as peer-reviewed journal articles and policy reviews on child migration and protection, NGO case studies and literature published between 2010 and 2024.

A systematic selection process was implemented to ensure the inclusion of relevant and credible materials:

Identification: A comprehensive search was conducted across academic databases (Google Scholar, ResearchGate, JSTOR), organisational repositories (UNICEF, IOM, Save the Children) and government portals using keywords such as "child migration Zimbabwe", "child protection policy Zimbabwe", and "unaccompanied minors Southern Africa".

Screening: Documents were screened by title, abstract and summary to assess their relevance. Duplicates and documents lacking institutional credibility were excluded.

Eligibility: Only materials explicitly discussing child protection, migration, or institutional policy responses, were retained.

Data was analyzed using Bowen's (2009) model for qualitative document analysis, which enables cycles of skimming, reading, coding and interpreting. The process included an initial review to identify general themes, a detailed reading to extract policy and institutional content and coding using a manual matrix. Statements were categorised under three major themes: Policy Gaps, Legal Gaps and Institutional Gaps. Thematic interpretation was guided by the Child Rights Approach and the Vulnerability-Resilience Theory.

Credibility and trustworthiness were ensured through triangulation of various document types, transparency in the selection process, a theoretical grounding for the analysis and this to minimises research bias. Since this research relied exclusively on publicly available documents and institutional reports, ethical clearance was not required. However, all sources were appropriately acknowledged and intellectual property rights were respected through proper referencing.

FINDINGS

The qualitative analysis of documents has revealed ongoing policy, legal and institutional weaknesses that undermine the protection of children on the move in Zimbabwe. Three major themes emerged from the review of these materials:

POLICY GAPS: LIMITED ALIGNMENT BETWEEN COMMITMENTS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Zimbabwe has ratified international conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the African

Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), which require the state to ensure protection, participation and provision for all children, including those on the move. However, an analysis of national policies, such as the National Child Policy (2019) and the National Migration Policy (2020), reveals that migrant and unaccompanied children are not explicitly addressed. While these policies refer to vulnerable children in general terms, they lack specific provisions for children affected by migration, cross-border movement or trafficking. This absence creates a normative vacuum that hinders effective implementation. Consequently, the policy framework remains largely reactive, focusing on child protection only after harm has occurred, rather than establishing preventive mechanisms at borders or within communities.

Recent policy reviews reveal that the National Child Policy (2019) and the National Migration Policy (2020) were created in isolation, with limited collaboration between ministries. This lack of inclusivity has led to overlapping mandates and inconsistent success indicators. For instance, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare measures child protection outcomes based on the number of institutional cases, while the Ministry of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage relies on border control statistics, two data sets that seldom align. Moreover, both policies lack detailed implementation matrices that include cost projections, which means budget allocations are often arbitrary and reliant on donor funding cycles. According to UNICEF (2023), this lack of financial planning makes policy objectives more aspirational than actionable. Therefore, the absence of a coherent

strategy increases reliance on NGOs for programme delivery, resulting in uneven protection coverage across provinces.

LEGAL GAPS: OUTDATED AND FRAGMENTED LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The Children's Act (Chapter 5:06) and the Trafficking in Persons Act (2014) provide partial protection but are outdated and fragmented. They do not fully incorporate international principles such as inclusion and family reunification or access to legal identity for migrant children. Court proceedings rarely prioritise cases involving child migration and there is no consistent legal mechanism for the guardianship of unaccompanied minors. The Births and Deaths Registration Act also limits access to documentation for children born outside formal systems, increasing their risk of statelessness. This finding aligns with Mhlanga (2018), who notes that while Zimbabwe has strong constitutional commitments to child rights, legislative harmonisation remains weak. The lack of migration-sensitive child laws reveals a significant implementation gap within the Child Rights Approach, where duty-bearers fail to translate ratified instruments into enforceable national practices.

Recent policy reviews indicate that the National Child Policy (2019) and the National Migration Policy (2020) were developed in isolation, with minimal collaboration between ministries. This lack of inclusivity has resulted in overlapping mandates and inconsistent success indicators. For instance, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare measures child protection outcomes based on institutional case numbers, while the Ministry of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage focuses on border control statistics. These two datasets rarely align. This overlap implies that

there is role confusion, duplication of efforts and no one will take full responsibility for protecting migrant children. Hence, there is need for a specific institution to deal with cases of migrant children on the move.

Additionally, both policies lack costed implementation matrices, leading to arbitrary budget allocations that depend on donor cycles. According to UNICEF (2023), this absence of financial planning makes the intentions of the policies more aspirational than actionable. As a result, there is a reliance on NGOs for programme delivery, which creates uneven protection coverage across provinces. The reliance on NGOs means that the protection services of migrant children may collapse when donors withdraw, thus the government should avail funds to protect migrant children on the move.

INSTITUTIONAL GAPS: WEAK COORDINATION AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

Institutions responsible for protecting children, such as the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, the Department of Immigration and various social work departments, often operate in isolation. Documentary evidence from UNICEF (2020) and Save the Children (2021) indicates that coordination between these institutions is ad hoc, frequently driven by donor initiatives and reactive to crises. Reports from the the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2011; 2022) highlight that border posts like Beitbridge and Plumtree lack dedicated child-friendly facilities and have insufficient numbers of trained social workers. Additionally, data management systems are largely manual, leading to poor monitoring and duplication of cases. This

fragmentation within institutions aligns with the observations of Mundau and Chikowe (2023), who note that while foster care mechanisms exist for unaccompanied children, weak institutional support undermines their effectiveness. From a Vulnerability-Resilience perspective, these institutional weaknesses increase vulnerability by eroding children's capacity to adapt and cope with migration-related risks. This contributes to institutional invisibility of migrant children, making them harder to protect.

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight a significant gap between policy commitments and actual implementation, which is a central theme in both the literature and the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study.

LINKING FINDINGS TO THE CHILD RIGHTS APPROACH

According to the Child Rights Approach, the Zimbabwean state has a duty to ensure that every child, regardless of migration status, has access to protection, participation and basic services. However, the ongoing gaps identified, such as outdated laws, insufficient policy specificity and poor institutional coordination, illustrate a failure of duty bearers to fulfil rights-based commitments. As UNICEF (2023) states, rights frameworks are effective only when they are translated into clear, enforceable legal mechanisms. The absence of explicit policies addressing migrant children not only signifies a failure in implementation, but also a structural violation of children's rights. This aligns with the arguments made by Ennew (2008) and Hanson and Nieuwenhuys (2013), who contend that children in migration contexts often fall

through institutional cracks because policies fail to acknowledge their unique status as both children and migrants.

LINKING FINDINGS TO THE VULNERABILITY-RESILIENCE THEORY

The Vulnerability Resilience Theory (Chambers, 1989; Ungar, 2013) interprets the identified institutional gaps as factors that exacerbate risk. Children's vulnerability increases when protection systems fail to provide consistent support. Conversely, resilience can emerge when community networks and NGOs step in to address the shortcomings left by the state. Evidence from Save the Children (2021) and UNICEF (2020) indicates that informal community child protection committees, although underfunded, often provide immediate psychosocial and logistical support to children on the move. These grassroots interventions exemplify resilience mechanisms, but without institutional integration and recognition by the state, they remain fragile. Thus, the theory elucidates how institutional dysfunction directly contributes to increased vulnerability and emphasizes that building resilience necessitates policy reform, institutional strengthening and active community involvement.

COMPARISON WITH EXISTING LITERATURE

The findings are consistent with those of Gwenzi *et al.* (2016), who observe that child migration in Zimbabwe is driven by socio-economic pressures but is not adequately addressed within formal protection systems. Similarly, Rodet and Razy (2016) note that African migration policies often disregard kinship and community structures, treating children as passive victims rather than active agents. The results of this study confirm this oversight: policies and institutions in Zimbabwe frequently overlook the agency and

contextual realities of children migrating independently or as part of family networks.

Additionally, the weak implementation of rights-based frameworks resonates with the findings of Crush, Chikanda and Tawodzera (2015), who emphasize that the governance of human mobility in Southern Africa suffers from poor inter-state collaboration and resource scarcity. Therefore, this study not only corroborates existing literature but also expands it by demonstrating that institutional weaknesses are the primary mechanism through which policy gaps translate into child vulnerability in Zimbabwe.

INTEGRATIVE DISCUSSION

Combining the Child Rights Approach and Vulnerability Resilience Theory provides a comprehensive understanding of the issue. From a rights-based perspective, the state's obligations are both legal and moral; from a resilience standpoint, protection is practical and systemic. The intersection of these two viewpoints reveals that Zimbabwe's protection gaps arise not only from inadequate laws, but also from weak institutional frameworks that hinder the translation of policy into real-world safety. Therefore, bridging the gap between policy and practice requires legal reforms, improved coordination and investment in community-based protection, all of which can transform vulnerability into resilience and translate abstract rights into actionable realities.

STATE ACCOUNTABILITY AND INSTITUTIONAL STAGNATION

Zimbabwe has shown a commitment to international instruments. However, the ongoing institutional stagnation highlights a deeper crisis of accountability. From the perspective of the Child Rights

Approach, limited enforcement mechanisms and outdated statutes reveal a systemic failure among duty-bearers to implement children's rights effectively. The issues of institutional fragmentation, overlapping responsibilities between ministries and weak budget oversight collectively point to a governance gap, rather than just an administrative shortcoming. This observation aligns with UNICEF's (2023) assertion that rights frameworks are only effective when they are integrated into binding, well-resourced institutional procedures. Therefore, child protection should be regarded not as optional social work, but as a constitutional obligation that necessitates measurable institutional performance.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND INFORMAL SYSTEMS

The Vulnerability-Resilience Theory helps explain why informal community networks often succeed where formal systems fail. In districts like Beitbridge and Chipinge, community child protection committees, church networks and traditional leaders provide essential support to stranded or repatriated children. Although these mechanisms lack legal status, they represent local adaptive capacities that help mitigate the absence of institutional support. According to Save the Children (2021) and Mundau and Chikowe (2023), these structures offer immediate psychosocial care, but their effectiveness is often hindered by inconsistent recognition and limited financial support from the government. By integrating these grassroots mechanisms into official referral pathways, these initiatives can be transformed from temporary coping strategies into lasting frameworks of resilience. This aligns with Ungar's (2013) perspective that resilience is socially constructed through the availability and legitimacy of supportive institutions.

In conclusion, Zimbabwe's child protection system for children on the move is conceptually robust but practically deficient. The

convergence of theoretical frameworks and existing literature demonstrates that without institutional coherence and rights-based accountability, children's safety remains more of an illusion than an enforceable reality.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate that the gap between policy and practice is worsened by weak regional coordination. Despite commitments outlined in the SADC Migration Policy Framework (2020), bilateral child protection protocols between Zimbabwe and its neighbouring countries remain underdeveloped. The lack of harmonised guardianship and data-sharing mechanisms disrupts care when children cross borders or are repatriated. This regional disconnection turns what should be a system of administrative cooperation into a recurring vulnerability for these children. Therefore, strengthening cross-border coordination through shared databases, standardised operating procedures and repatriation agreements would enhance both resilience and compliance with rights across Southern Africa.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study offers valuable insights into the institutional weaknesses in protecting children on the move in Zimbabwe. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research relied solely on secondary data sources, including policy documents, legislative texts, evaluation reports and academic literature. While document analysis allowed for the identification of institutional patterns, it did not capture the lived experiences or perceptions of frontline workers and affected children. Consequently, certain factors such as emotional resilience,

informal coping strategies and community-based interventions may remain underexplored.

Another limitation involves the potential bias present in documents produced by government and donor organisations. Some reports may frame their findings in a way that aligns with institutional mandates or funding priorities, which can compromise the objectivity of the data. Additionally, the geographic coverage of the analyzed materials was uneven, there was a greater focus on border districts like Beitbridge and Plumtree, while northern and eastern provinces were less represented.

Future research should employ mixed or participatory methods to supplement document analysis. Engaging children, caregivers and social workers through interviews or focus group discussions may provide deeper insights into how institutional weaknesses are experienced and navigated in practice. Comparative regional studies across SADC countries may also help identify transferable policy models. Longitudinal research that tracks the outcomes of institutional reforms, would further enhance our understanding of how resilience and protection evolve.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Zimbabwe's child protection system for children on the move is conceptually sound but practically hindered by ongoing institutional weaknesses. Although the policy and legal frameworks align well with international standards, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), they are undermined by limited enforcement, resource shortages and fragmented coordination across different

ministries. The findings indicate that protection failures stem not from a lack of policy, but from weak institutional performance and inadequate accountability mechanisms.

From the Child Rights Approach perspective, the state's role as a duty-bearer is compromised by the ineffective implementation of rights. From the Vulnerability–Resilience Theory viewpoint, resilience among children and communities diminishes when institutions fail to provide consistent support systems.

Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires simultaneous focus on three key areas: legal and structural reform to ensure compliance with rights; institutional strengthening through resource allocation and improved coordination; and the recognition of community-level resilience mechanisms that can complement formal systems. A comprehensive approach involving both government and society is essential to transform policy commitments into real protection outcomes. Achieving this would also contribute to Zimbabwe's broader Vision 2030 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals by fostering inclusive, child-sensitive institutions. Therefore, the study provides a basis for ongoing discussions among policymakers, scholars and practitioners dedicated to improving child protection in Zimbabwe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Legislative Reform:** Amend the Children's Act (Chapter 5:06) to explicitly include protections for migrant, undocumented and stateless children. The law should incorporate cross-border guardianship and non-refoulement principles to align with international standards.

2. **Policy Coherence:** Establish a National Child Migration Coordination Framework that links immigration, social welfare, justice and police databases to harmonise data management and service delivery.
3. **Institutional Capacity Building:** Increase the budgetary allocation for child protection to a minimum of 1% of the national budget. This should strengthen staffing levels, enhance professional training and improve case management capacity in border districts.
4. **Community Integration:** Officially recognise and integrate community child protection committees and church-based support structures into formal referral networks to bolster grassroots resilience.
5. **Cross-border Cooperation:** Develop bilateral and multilateral agreements with South Africa, Botswana and Mozambique to ensure continuity of guardianship, safe repatriation and shared data systems for tracking unaccompanied minors.
6. **Digitisation of Case Management:** Implement an integrated Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS) to facilitate real-time case tracking and improve accountability.
7. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish an independent Child Protection Oversight Board that is mandated to review and report annually to Parliament on implementation progress, ensuring transparency and institutional accountability.
8. **Public Awareness:** Conduct nationwide awareness campaigns on child migration risks, birth registration and reporting mechanisms using schools, churches and local media.

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