



A COMPARATIVE POLICY ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL INCENTIVES AND AFFORDABILITY STRATEGIES FOR ATTRACTING DIGITAL NOMADS: LESSONS FROM CHIANG MAI, THAILAND AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR BULAWAYO, ZIMBABWE

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Problem Statement

The world of employment today has been significantly changed, mostly driven by rapid advances in information technology, the use of cloud computing, and the widespread availability of high-speed internet infrastructure. The digital evolution, which fast-tracked following the COVID-19 pandemic, has detached professional output from fixed geographic locations and contributed to the growth of the digital nomad population (Cook, 2023). Such experts fly abroad and continue their work on remote networks. Such a change produces a new dynamic in lifestyle migration and impacts how cities deal with their local spaces (Hannonen, 2020). It is crucial that the local policy design adapts to the needs of this highly mobile workforce, as governments become more and more conscious of the external financial capital and knowledge that these workers bring in (Mancinelli, 2025).

Long known as the industrial heartland of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo provides a unique metropolitan backdrop in which to study modern migration trends. From the late twentieth century onwards, the city witnessed a major de-industrialisation process, leading to the closure of large manufacturing businesses and a huge reduction in formal employment (Mbira, 2015). Responding to this decline, local governments and national planners have emphasised on service-based approaches and cultural tourism to foster urban economic renewal. Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's cultural capital due to its architectural heritage and proximity to key archaeological sites like the Khami Ruins and Motobo Hills has the ability to reinvent its economic future by attracting digital remote workers.

Bulawayo has rich cultural resources but unique governmental challenges that affect the city's potential to attract global distant talent. The local legal environment does not have a specific talent attraction plan or a specialist digital nomad visa, and long-term visitors are dependent on limited short-term tourist visas that require frequent and expensive renewals (KC and Triandafyllidou, 2025). Furthermore, the spatial dimension of digital nomadism is heavily determined by the management of daily infrastructure and accessibility by local authorities (Bozzi, 2024). Currently, the macro-economic situation in Zimbabwe has structural issues such as the high cost of living and the growth in internet service rates that are related to the dollarised economy that affects the destination's financial competitiveness (Munhupedzi and Chidakwa, 2019).

It is vital to address these legislative and economic friction points if local municipal initiatives are to be aligned with Zimbabwe's national development goals established in Vision 2030, which seeks to build an innovation-driven economy. The local healthcare scene is a big hurdle for mobile professionals who earn a lot of money. This environment is often based on out-of-pocket costs and does not have integrated medical insurance choices for international residents (World Health Organization, 2024). Developing governments should build clear frameworks for mobile populations to achieve sustainable development goals (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Bulawayo has the potential to establish a functional ecosystem that effectively capitalises on the economic benefits of global remote workforce.

Policy Analysis

This section evaluates the regulatory, economic, and institutional factors shaping destination attractiveness by applying Frank Fischer's (1995) four-level policy evaluation framework. Moving away from primary field data, this analysis relies entirely on secondary sources, including published academic literature, national legislative frameworks, and official tourism policies from both Thailand and Zimbabwe. By comparing the proven practices of Chiang Mai with the current structural realities of Bulawayo, this brief highlights the core friction points and opportunities for local policy alignment.

Key findings

Technical-Verification (Program Metrics): The comparative analysis of formal policy instruments reveals clear differences in how both nations manage remote labor. Thailand has a multi-tier visa system that suits various economic levels. The Long-Term Resident visa needs substantial salaries but the newer Destination Thailand Visa (DTV) lowers the entry hurdles with a flexible five-year, multiple-entry track. On the other hand, Zimbabwe doesn't have a distinct legal pathway for remote workers. Foreign professionals are left with the regular short-term tourist entry permits. The lack of a specific instrument results in costly administrative bottlenecks and the necessity for regular and costly renewals.

Analysis of localised policy settings demonstrates that domestic macroeconomic realities are a direct determinant of destination competitiveness. Chiang Mai boasts stable local prices and a well-established organic infrastructure, including inexpensive housing, high-speed internet widely available, and a dense network of cafes. By comparison, Bulawayo has a dollarised economy and this puts serious limits on finance for overseas visitors. Although local apartment rentals are relatively cheap, the broader cost of living is high. Moreover, internet data rates in Zimbabwe are higher than in 98% of African cities and the absence of a clear medical insurance pool for foreigners is a big practical barrier to long-term stays.

The study of institutional actors highlights the consequences of administrative disintegration or cooperation on the socioeconomic system as a whole. In Thailand, the central ministries and the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) collaborate directly with commercial co-working operators and digital platforms. This coordination means that immigration rules support the demands of remote workers in their day-to-day lives without impacting local services. Zimbabwe's institutional set-up is fragmented, with national departments dealing with immigration, banking and telecommunications separately. Also, the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) only markets wildlife and leisure in a traditional manner, with no link to the wider remote visitor economy and national growth plans.

The comparative policy matrix demonstrates a basic mismatch in how both destinations understand the objective of talent attraction. The city of Chiang Mai has evolved beyond hardware basics to create social environments that encourage community integration and long-term residency. Bulawayo's solid base assets include an English speaking populace, a large metropolitan footprint and a robust regional cultural identity. However, these local strengths are not being realized because the state lacks a unified remote work strategy. The current framework fails to align national development policies with the city's cultural advantages, preventing Bulawayo from transitioning into a modern digital and cultural capital.



Discussion

The differences between formal policy instruments in the two cities highlight how nations use migration rules to achieve distinct national goals, an analytical focus that aligns with the technical-verification and situational validation levels of Fischer's (1995) framework. Governments build specialized visa categories to actively capture global innovation and human capital, not only wealth (KC and Triandafyllidou, 2025). Thailand's introduction of the flexible Destination Thailand Visa represents a strong understanding of this notion and significantly lowers the obstacles of entry for mobility professionals. This stands in sharp contrast to the environment in Bulawayo. There is no remote work visa designated for this purpose, resulting in unnecessary red tape. Migration channels should be transparent and accessible as they are the initial point of contact for a nomad worker in a country, stresses Cook (2023). This makes restrictive immigration laws a motivator of talent to more adaptive regions.

To evaluate these effects from Fischer's (1995) perspective of situational validation, secondary data reveal that the home macroeconomic climate directly modifies the way digital platforms affect local costs of living. According to Zuboff (2019), digital platforms are able to monitor human experiences and commodify physical locations through data. In places like Chiang Mai, this creates highly visible digital enclaves that attract remote workers, however Busuttil (2025) warns that such platform-led growth can lead to localized spikes in property prices, putting native neighborhoods at risk of gentrification. In a dollarized economy like Zimbabwe's, the pressure on the market becomes very intense. The lack of local price flexibility due to operating under a strong foreign currency adds to the high cost of data utilities, making Bulawayo less competitive for budget-conscious professionals (Munhupedzi and Chidakwa, 2019).

Fischer's (1995) third level, system vindication, helps explain why a successful remote work center must look beyond basic technical infrastructure to the soft elements of a city, ensuring that the arriving workforce integrates with the wider socioeconomic system. The place-based feature of remote work is primarily dependent on organic infrastructure that offers the emotional and physical anchors that support long-term residency (Bozzi, 2024). Castells (2025) characterizes the idea of the networked society that suggests that contemporary social structures revolve around information networks. This implies that mobile workers want to be in places where the social density is high and active peer groups are present. This is achieved through the creation of urban spaces that are laptop friendly in Chiang Mai. Local institutions should be aware that digital professionals prefer places where work and culture are harmoniously combined, in order to use their rich heritage as an economic pull factor (Chevtaeva and Denizci-Guillet, 2021).

Finally, at the last stage of Fischer's (1995) rational social choice, the organization of governmental departments reflects the basic values of society and vision of the country. Farrell et al., (2023) stated that many talent-attraction projects are bound to fail due to the severe lack of communication and policy coordination across different government ministries. Thailand is tackling this difficulty by developing coordination among Immigration, digital infrastructure and tourism marketing organisations. Zimbabwe's institutional framework is still fragmented, with the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority focusing on conventional leisure tourism. Bahri (2024) further argues that the genuine openness of a country to this migratory phenomena is based on its capacity to adapt its promotional systems. Hence the need for a concerted effort by the state for the future development of Bulawayo.



Policy Recommendations

This section outlines the actionable policy interventions required to establish a remote work ecosystem in Bulawayo and details the structural implications of these changes for local economic development.

Recommendations

The Zimbabwe Ministry of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage should introduce a Digital Nomad Visa and a simple electronic Visa-on-Arrival platform to reduce administrative complexity. This legal document needs to offer a flexible, multi-entry residency track for 12-24 months with practical income thresholds for medium class remote workers. There is need to move away from short-term tourist entry permits and develop a transparent, long-term structure that reduces regulatory ambiguity and ensures Bulawayo remains a safe and inviting destination for mobile international talent.

Bulawayo's organic infrastructure has to be crafted through a collaborative effort between Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, Ministry of ICT and municipal planners through targeted technological subsidies. State actors should engage with private telecommunications companies to establish high-speed, reliable internet zones in cultural areas such as suburbs and city center. The high utility cost barrier of dollarization can be lowered by providing financial incentives or tax breaks to local business owners that establish laptop-friendly offices and accept digital payment systems, creating a linked urban ecosystem that supports remote labour.

The government should establish a secure public-private medical insurance pool for abroad remote workers to break down the healthcare barrier. Foreigners applying for a visa should be allowed to purchase pre-verified full health packages from the Ministry of Finance and local private insurers. Such a method will allow direct access to high quality local medical facilities with no financial risk and will solve a key safety issue for long term tourists with cash to finance municipal healthcare infrastructure.

Policy implications

These regulatory and structural changes will help Zimbabwe achieve its Vision 2030 development goals. The state can diversify its external revenue streams by switching from leisure tourism marketing to mobile talent attraction. This structural shift makes Bulawayo a regional technology and innovation hub, attracting high-skilled international professionals who invest directly in local enterprises, retail, and cultural hospitality.

A specialised nomad visa and utility subsidy system will boost domestic knowledge spillover. Bulawayo's urban long-term mobile professionals organically interact with tech startups, creative sectors, and business students. Physical closeness fosters spontaneous mentorship, skill sharing, and digital capacity building. These social networks improve local workforces and municipal industry digital capacities without substantial governmental investments.

An institutional buffer against platform-driven housing inflation's socioeconomic effects is also provided by structured policy. Remote worker concentrations can be managed by municipal zoning and targeted public-private partnerships to prevent severe residential gentrification in popular global centers. This governmental control balances housing availability and consumer pricing, protecting local populations from being priced out of their neighbourhoods under a dollarised economy.

Integrated health pools and modern digital infrastructure generate external revenues that fund municipal upgrades, ensuring talent-attraction policies sustainably benefit local citizens without straining resources.



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