



Mobiles beat Zimbabwe fuel queues

By Lucy Fleming
BBC News website

Shamwari Lucy, Uri bho here? Thanks a bunch for using Mukuru.com
Mukuru message

Text messages from abroad have never been received so eagerly by cash-strapped Zimbabweans.

The "beep beep" signals an end to hours spent queuing at petrol stations.

"Hey... you have been sent a Mukuru Voucher for 40 litres of Petrol from..." reads the message.

A voucher number follows which allows the recipient to swap the pin number for coupons redeemable at certain garages.

This is all the handiwork of Mukuru.com - a website set up by Zimbabweans in the UK to help their fellow countrymen in the diaspora pay for petrol, satellite TV or transfer money to their friends and relatives at home.

It properly got off the ground last year, and its customers are steadily growing as news of it spreads.

Little fuss

Within seconds of opening an account and sending an order to a grateful guinea pig in Zimbabwe, I received an email from Mukuru.

"Shamwari Lucy, Uri bho here? (friend, how are you?)" it began in conversational Shona.

"Thanks a bunch for using Mukuru.com - we have sent an email to (your friend) notifying them of the order below."

The next morning, another email arrived to tell me the funds had cleared and a voucher had been issued.

At the same time, my friend in the capital, Harare, got a text message and went off to collect the petrol coupons - valid for three months. Forty litres costs \$40 - the going black market rate.

Several days later they went to fill their car, with little fuss from one of Zimbabwe's garages allowed to import fuel using foreign currency.

"I arrived there at 3pm and looked in the book and they must've sold more than 500 litres that day," my friend said.

Groceries

I was left in no doubt about my generosity, receiving texts to let me know about every moment of the transaction right up until the petrol was gushing into the tank.

I think Zimbabwe would be dead right now if wasn't for imports - it would be on its knees

Zimbuyer spokesman

For one of the founding members of Zimbuyer.com - another new website allowing Zimbabweans to buy groceries for people at home - this control is what makes these services popular.

"They're a lot of people who left Zimbabwe and, for example, have left their children over there," he told the BBC News website.

"But sometimes the money they have sent home for the care of their children is diverted into other things.

"With our service, people buy the stuff - we deliver them to the recipients so they know that they're buying."

Shopping on Zimbuyer - run by a team of four in the US and UK - is like doing a supermarket shop online in the UK, with a little less software finesse.

The prices are marked in British pounds, but the products are Zimbabwean staples such as sadza maize, Cashel Valley Baked Beans and Ingrams Camphor Cream - delivered to addresses in Harare, Chitungwiza and Bulawayo.

Lifeline

Zimland.com offers a similar service for customers from 52 OK supermarket branches nationwide. Its website says it gives Zimbabweans abroad "a quick and efficient way of ensuring their families did not starve in Zimbabwe".

We're running it as a service to help people

Dr Brighton Chireka

With Zimbabwe's economy spiralling out of control, high unemployment and one of the highest HIV rates in the world, people in the diaspora can literally provide a lifeline.

UK-based Dr Brighton Chireka and his wife Prisca, a nurse, have set up Beepee Medical Services, allowing Zimbabweans abroad to pay for doctor's appointments, prescription drugs and surgery for relatives at home.

"Mostly we're running it as a service to help people," Dr Chireka told the BBC News website, adding that since its launch last September BPMS now gets about two consultation bookings (\$30 an appointment) a day.

"It should be able to pay itself... We've employed people who are working full-time in Zimbabwe. This side it's on a part-time basis to answer the calls."

Dr Chireka says they have to review their prices every two or three weeks because of the rampant inflation which stands at 3,731.9% - a climate ripe for a flourishing black market.

This is something Zimbabwe's no-nonsense central bank governor is keen to stamp out.

Legal

Last year Gideon Gono banned several money transfer agencies, accusing them of abusing their licences by doing deals on the black market.

Zimbuyer says their service - which at the moment attracts about 10 customers a day - is a way around this for Zimbabweans abroad who are loath to send money back at the official rates.

Last week, the black market rate was Z\$29,000 to US\$1 - compared to the long-standing official rate of Z\$250 to US\$1. This week, the black market rate for the US dollar has risen by Z\$4,000.

"The government it is cracking down on the black market or foreign currency dealers - they buy money in Zimbabwe or take the wealth outside Zimbabwe which is something we're not doing," the Zimbuyer spokesman - which imports most of the products - told the BBC.

"I think Zimbabwe would be dead right now if wasn't for imports - it would be on its knees."

Mukuru.com also allows customers to transfer money - at the black-market rate - to accounts in Zimbabwe; it has also started this service to South Africa.

Their customer service line says a "dispersment agent" deposits the money in Zimbabwe.

All the services are clearly being careful not to antagonise Mr Gono, and offer tight security and the online payment system PayPal for their clients.

And as Mukuru's petrol fame spreads, what are Zimbuyer's most popular products?

"Cooking oil and sugar - right now we've run out of the sugar we have it bought in from Botswana.

"And power generators are proving popular because the electricity always goes off nearly every day."

Have you used these services? Are there similar schemes in your country? Let us know your experiences.

I recently started using Mukuru for money transfers to support my parents. The process works extremely well, with email updates all the way. Highly recommended.

Big Al, Cotswolds, UK

As the saying goes: Necessity is the mother of invention. What is happening in Zimbabwe today and other African countries who have similar technologies in place, is technology to the rescue. Technology has drastically changed our way of life. Africans are equally enjoying what their Western counterpart enjoys too. We have to thank our brothers and sisters in diaspora who have not forgotten their families and friends back in Africa by continually making efforts to sustain them even though life is not a bed of roses over there. There are no similar scheme yet in Nigeria but it won't take too long for it to be in place.

Omorodion Osula, Boston, USA

Wow! What a great idea. Having spent some time in Zim last year this is fantastic news and I'm frantically trying to think of who I can text over there. Schemes like this are crucial to helping Zim stay on its feet and give Zimbabweans an element of freedom from the awful financial situation that the current dictatorship has managed to induce. Let's just hope these schemes stay corruption free.

Will Brown, London, UK

It is quite a creative way of helping people back at home. However this is a short term way of sorting out the problems. Use the same way to educate people back at home to know see the sense of voting a Govt with its citizens at heart. The turn around in Zimbabwe is in the people's hands - their votes. Use them wisely come the next elections

Fred Okoth, Nairobi, Kenya

Name

Your E-mail address

Phone number (optional):

Town & Country

Comments

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