



Briefing Paper 284

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Migration and Skills in South Africa

1. Introduction

South Africa has long been a destination for regional migration, with workers coming from Mozambique, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and other countries to work on the mines. This system was encouraged and regulated by Apartheid-era laws and policies that sought to maintain a pool of useful but disposable labour that could readily be deported back home should problems arise. Indeed, this system mirrored the internal policies of pass laws, 'homelands' and the Group Areas Act, which sought to disempower black people and keep them within 'white' South Africa only for as long as their labour was useful. In the post-apartheid period the laws have changed but the pattern of cheap labour entering the country has to some extent persisted. Generally, the influx of refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants has increased dramatically since 1994.

In respect of certain nations, migration patterns have changed significantly. For example, some recent surveys suggest that the influx from Botswana has slowed. This is linked to the fact that the economy of Botswana has been restructured around local mining activity, and as a result there is less incentive for people to seek work abroad. On the other hand, the devastating effects of Zanu-PF's economic policies have had the opposite effect, with huge numbers of Zimbabweans entering the country from 2000 onwards, seeking work.

2. Inward Migration

Migration into South Africa is an extremely contentious issue. In May 2008 a deadly brew of xenophobia, criminality and competition for scarce resources resulted in violent attacks on

foreigners in townships and informal settlements across the country. Thousands of foreigners were displaced and scores killed after they were attacked by mobs of locals who burned their homes and looted their businesses. These events were a severe moment of crisis for migration policy in South Africa. It was made painfully obvious to many observers just how high the stakes were. Now, more than ever, South Africa needs migration policy that is compassionate, responsive and that avoids the pitfalls of the past.

The issue of massive migration inflows cannot be wished away or ignored. The problem of xenophobia, similarly, cannot be ignored. If the situation is allowed to fester it will merely result in the same patterns repeating themselves. The government has floated some positive initiatives in the past few years. One example is the Zimbabwean Documentation Project. This was a Department of Home Affairs programme under which undocumented Zimbabweans, subject to certain restrictions, were allowed to apply for work or study visas from inside South Africa.

Unfortunately, the Zimbabwean Documentation Project was limited in scope, and made little provision for those who did not qualify for a visa. The Director General of the Department of Home Affairs has made comments suggesting that anyone who has been denied a visa will be summarily deported, and there are no further plans to regulate anyone who has been missed in the initial project¹. This attitude is, to say the least, unhelpful.

3. The Skills Crisis

These dynamics are playing out against the backdrop of a severe skills shortage in South

Africa. This was one of the key constraints on the economy identified by government in its preparation for ASGISA (Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative South Africa). There is ample evidence from surveys and studies by academics and non-governmental organizations that the chronic and continuing under-supply of skilled labour is resulting in real and significant harm to the economy.

This is partly driven by significant emigration. South Africa has experienced a severe brain drain, with large numbers of skilled persons emigrating. This was probably at least partly caused by fears among the educated white sector of the populace, immediately following 1994, but this pattern has set in and persisted in the ensuing decades. The emigrants have become more racially diverse, but they remain highly skilled and upwardly mobile – the kind of citizens that South African can least afford to lose.

Although emigration is a significant contributor to the skills shortage, this problem is also, and more fundamentally, driven by the continued failures of the South African education system. The collapse of the apprenticeship system for artisans, the failure of the Further Education and Training colleges to take up the slack, and the widespread disarray in South African primary and secondary schools are well documented, and this grim picture does not need to be repeated here. It should be mentioned, however, that unemployment in South Africa is largely structural. The unemployed are generally unskilled and poorly educated, while skilled labour attracts disproportionately high wages. In other words, unemployment is due solely to a lack of jobs, but rather to the fact that many people do not have the skills that the economy calls for. Qualified engineers are unlikely to have difficulty finding work, and will be able to charge a premium for their services; on the other hand, a person with a matric certificate or less will usually battle to find employment.

However, while the government struggles to reform the education system, the skills shortage continues to hamper South Africa's economy and prevents the kind of dramatic growth needed to lift large numbers of people out of poverty. Businesses are constantly frustrated by the difficulty of finding skilled employees. When an engineering firm cannot find engineers, this limits the number of projects it can take on, and

increases the cost of ones it does undertake. But this is not purely a private sector problem. When hospitals cannot find enough nurses or doctors, the quality of care suffers. Municipalities need engineers and technicians to maintain existing infrastructure and to expand electricity supplies and road networks and piped water. Not only is the skills shortage a problem for the economy, therefore, it also makes service delivery even more difficult.

4. Importing a Solution?

In this context, it is only natural that the idea of turning to immigrants to alleviate the skills shortage has come into vogue. There is at least anecdotal data that immigrants working in the informal sector tend to be more highly skilled than their local counterparts. This is particularly true of refugees, who may be highly qualified but who face significant barriers to entry into the formal economy. A survey from 2007 suggested that some 19% of Zimbabweans in the country had either a university degree or a professional qualification, such as nursing or education training. When one included artisanal qualifications (a much needed skill set in South Africa) the number rose to 23%².

As previously mentioned, government has recognised the problems with the skills shortage, and has managed to link it with immigration policy, in theory at least. It is a stated goal of the Department of Home Affairs to “attract scarce skills required by the economy in accordance with the 2014 vision of eradicating poverty and underdevelopment.”³

However, it is unclear how well this has been translated into new policies, or how effectively these policies have been carried out. Indeed, in a recent study commissioned by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), it was revealed that in 2008, only 1 133 skilled foreigner permits were issued by the Department of Home Affairs. This is ascribed to a combination of a cumbersome bureaucratic process and a culture of ‘skill shortage denialism’, in which the problem is simply not taken seriously⁴.

The CDE paper makes a strong argument for greatly relaxing border controls with a view to attracting skilled migrants, and to regulating and documenting unskilled migrants. Inter alia, the

argument presented is that unskilled migration is likely to continue, regardless of government efforts to stem the tide. Consequently, it is better to allow migrants into the country (and document and keep track of them) rather than having them come across the borders without documentation.

Politically, this is likely to be a tricky sell, and a significant portion of the ANC constituency is likely to view such an initiative in a poor light. The xenophobic attacks in the townships are strong evidence for the notion that many South Africans simply do not want more foreigners here, and view them as a direct threat to their lifestyle. This may be untrue and short-sighted, but in politics it is rarely a case of what is objectively true, but rather of what is believed.

The CDE paper acknowledges that this plan has been inspired by the American approach to immigration, which has traditionally allowed large numbers of immigrants to 'try their luck' in the United States. However, in the US this approach has not been without its problems, and it has come under political pressure recently. A significant portion of America's low level labour force is nowadays composed of undocumented immigrants, and this has become politically controversial, with notable anti-immigration movements emerging, particularly in border states such as Arizona. In South Africa there is little sign of a formal, anti-immigration movement, but this may have something to do with South Africa's political immaturity. Instead of petitions and political organizations, anti-immigrant sentiment has manifested itself in violence and rioting. Unfortunately, this makes it even harder to engage with and educate those who would deny foreigners access to our nation.

Even from those who have no objection to immigration, there will almost certainly be concerns about further xenophobia and consequent violence, based on the notion that increased inflows of foreigners will lead to further violence. Of course, this is not the best way of looking at matters – the important project is to dismantle xenophobia, not to allow violence to veto policies that may be good for the country. Close monitoring of the situation by security and intelligence agencies is needed. In addition, a concerted effort must be made to address the problem of xenophobia in the townships and informal settlements. Education, community forums and, above all, better services, will all be needed in order to address this issue.

5. Displacing the Problem?

More philosophically, there is another difficulty that needs to be considered. What are the ethics of South Africa actively recruiting skilled labour from its African neighbours? Should South Africa really be adding to the woes of countries to the north of us, which have already lost so many of their desperately needed doctors, nurses, teachers and other professionals to the 'African Diaspora'? Of course, the intention is a noble one: to improve South Africa's capacity to provide a 'better life for all'; but should this take place at the expense of our neighbours? Can we justifiably seek to build a better life for our own people if, in doing so, we harm the life prospects of others on the continent?

Two responses are usually made to this line of argument.

Firstly, it is important to understand why migrants choose to leave their home countries. Refugees' motives are easily understood – they have left their countries due to 'push' factors such as war, famine or political repression. Economic migrants are in a more complex situation. They may well have been drawn by opportunities abroad – 'pull' factors – but they are also very likely to have left due to a lack of economic opportunity in their home countries. Zimbabwean migrants are a case in point. Before the crisis began in 2000, Zimbabweans migrated in limited numbers; since the crisis began, the number of Zimbabweans leaving has soared. Clearly, many are leaving Zimbabwe not because South Africa is a wonderful destination, but because matters are so bad at home that they need to go elsewhere as a matter of economic survival. In this account, South African migration policy does not particularly deter or encourage immigration – rather, it simply determines whether immigrants will be forced to languish in the informal economy, or whether, on the other hand, they can use their skills and abilities in the formal economy.

Secondly, it can be argued that it is better for African skilled personnel to stay in Africa, and thus at least contribute to the continental economy. A Somali working in Canada or the US will largely benefit the first world economy, while a Somali working in South Africa will benefit South Africa and, at least by extension, the African continent. In this way, migration to South Africa keeps skills 'closer to home' than if they were to

leave the continent entirely.

Frankly, this argument is unconvincing. Impoverished countries in Africa are not going to be thrilled at the notion of 'their' skilled professionals being encouraged to move to South Africa, with the vague notion of some kind of 'pan-African economy' being invoked as justification. Unfortunately, it is extremely hard to move away from zero-sum logic in this situation. When Ghana or Malawi or any other country in Africa spends large sums of money on training its citizens, it is with the hope and expectation that this will benefit their country and their economy, not South Africa. While it would be coercive and untenable for these countries to ban emigration, there is some legitimacy to the notion that wealthier countries should not 'poach' skilled professionals from their less developed neighbours. It might also be argued that people who have had their tertiary education subsidized by public money ought to be required to pay back all or a portion of that amount before emigrating.

Finally on this point, there is another perspective which must be taken in to account. Many expatriates working in South Africa and in first world countries remit a significant portion of their income to their home countries. In some cases, such remittances constitute a vital source of income for their families, and a desperately-needed flow of foreign exchange for their governments. If steps were taken to prevent or restrict the mobility of highly-qualified people from poor countries, this crucial revenue-stream would be cut off.

6. Conclusion

South Africa desperately needs reform in its migration policy. There have been some welcome measures, such as the Zimbabwean Documentation Project, but unfortunately these

have been limited in scope. Further programmes to document and 'regularise' current migrants should be implemented with zeal and urgency.

As ever in South Africa, there a significant gap between the aspirations of government policy, and the realities of its implementation. The Department of Home Affairs supposedly wishes to attract skilled labour to our shores, but its efforts have borne little fruit. This is at least partly due to a fixation with keeping people out, even when they have significant skills and entrepreneurial drive.

Alongside all of this, it is critical that more attention be paid to managing the integration of foreigners into South Africa. It is not enough simply to assume that a more *laissez faire* approach to immigration will be accepted by locals. Just dishing out visas will not deal with the vicious fault lines of xenophobia that run through South Africa.

However, it is important and necessary to reflect on how South Africa can manage migration beyond narrow self-interest. Serious thought needs to be given to policies and initiatives that will address undocumented migration and the skills needs of both South Africa and her neighbouring countries. It is particularly interesting to note that countries with relatively successful economies and political processes (such as Botswana) tend to have low numbers of migrants, by comparison with those that suffer from brutal want and savage repression, such as Zimbabwe. The obvious lesson is that it is very much in South Africa's interest to support positive economic and political developments in neighbouring countries. When our neighbours suffer, so do we.

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1 The Director General made these comments on 19 September 2011 at a Parliamentary hearing on the progress of the Zimbabwean Documentation Project.

2 Makina qtd. in Cross et al :26

3 Department of Home Affairs Website 2011

4 Johnson, Sandy: 4

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