
Migration within Africa

The View from South Africa

KAREN JACOBSEN

In the 1970s, the city of Johannesburg, where I grew up as a white South African, was a quiet, orderly place with leafy suburbs where whites lived a life of ease. The city had a downtown business district that hummed with financial activity by day and was deserted at night. As a student, I waited tables at Piaf, a small French restaurant on Commissioner Street, and when it closed at 11:00 p.m., I walked, unconcerned, down the street to my VW Beetle and drove through the dark, silent city to my home in the northern suburbs. In those apartheid days and during the Emergency¹ in the 1980s, the city was under curfew for blacks, who could not be there after dark without special permission. Black South Africans were required to live in surrounding townships like Soweto and Alexandria, huge urban ghettos without electricity or running water, some as far as 20 miles away. Each morning, trains would bring the black workers into the central station, and from there people would take buses or taxis to their jobs. At night they reversed direction, and by 7:00 p.m. the city was quiet and almost empty.

Today, this city of my youth has been transformed both by the forces of political change within South Africa and by migration from the rest of the continent. These days, few people, regardless of race, would venture alone down Commissioner Street late at night, and the city is no longer dark or silent in the evenings. Johannesburg has become a metropolis of over three million people, many of whom live in the downtown area and many—perhaps most—of whom are migrants from other African countries or rural parts of South Africa. While South Africa has a long history of labor migration, migration to Johannesburg increased dramatically after

Dr. Karen Jacobsen is Associate Professor at the School of Nutrition and Science Policy, Tufts University, and teaches courses on field methods and on forced migration at The Fletcher School. Her current research focuses on urban refugees and IDPs in Africa and on livelihood interventions in conflict-affected areas (with an area focus on Sudan). Her most recent book, The Economic Life of Refugees, was published in 2005.

the breakdown of the apartheid laws, the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990, and South Africa's first fully democratic election in 1994. This significant increase was a result of two phenomena characterizing African migration in the 1990s: increased out-migration pressure from many African countries and urbanization.

In recent years, increasing numbers of Africans have sought to migrate to Europe, with varying degrees of success. As "Fortress Europe" works to secure its borders and harmonize its migration policies within the European Union to regulate immigration, some European governments have struck deals with national governments to allow for repatriation of migrants. For example, in the past year, more than 22,000 Senegalese migrants sought to enter Spanish territory illegally, mostly through the Canary Islands. As of October 2006, Spain has returned more than 2,000 of these migrants to Senegal—with many more returns planned for the future.² Immigration policies such as these have prompted migrants to look for opportunities within the African continent, particularly in South Africa.

The continent-wide stream of migration to South Africa is twinned with a second phenomenon. As in other developing countries, African cities are distinguished by their high urban growth rates.³ Africa was the continent with the lowest level of urbanization in 1950, but today its urban growth rate is among the highest in the world. (See Table 1.) According to the United Nations' population projections, Africa's urban population was 15 percent in 1950, 32 percent in 1990, and is projected to be 43 percent by 2015.⁴ Most large African cities attract growing numbers of migrants, particularly from the surrounding region. But with fewer options for Africans to migrate out of the continent, many make their way to the economic powerhouse that is South Africa. As a result, Johannesburg—in fact, all of South Africa—has had to come to grips with its new role as Africa's primary migrant destination.⁵

TABLE 1

Projected urban growth rates for selected African countries, 2000 to 2005⁶

COUNTRY	URBAN GROWTH RATE	COUNTRY	URBAN GROWTH RATE
South Africa	1.6	Malawi	4.8
Sierra Leone	5.9	Kenya	3.2
Senegal	2.8	Ghana	3.8
Rwanda	9.1	Egypt	2.0
Nigeria	4.0	Democratic Republic	
Mozambique	4.3	of Congo	4.2

In many ways, South Africa is a microcosm of internal and international migration throughout the African continent, embodying similar patterns, societal responses, and government policies. Researchers have identified the following key challenges shaping migration in South Africa and Africa at large:

- Growth in the volume and complexity of cross-border movements, including reduced legal migration, increased undocumented migration and trafficking, and increased intra-regional informal cross-border trade
- The skills “brain drain” from Africa
- The problem of HIV-AIDS in a context of high migration
- The repatriation of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the increase in internal displacement
- Rapid urbanization and reconfiguration of rural-urban linkages
- The integration and rights of migrants, including residence status and access to citizenship or denizen legal status⁷

This article covers only a few of these issues, specifically as they relate to current research being conducted by myself and a colleague at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Our African Cities project explores the experience of refugees and other migrants from conflict-affected countries—including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, and Somalia—in four African urban centers: Johannesburg, South Africa; Maputo, Mozambique; Nairobi, Kenya; and Lubumbashi, a city in the southern part of the DRC. Focusing on inner-city areas heavily populated by migrants, we compare the livelihood experiences of migrants and a “control group” of nationals and explore the importance of social and familial networks, transnational connections, local urban development policies, and other informal and formal resources. We teamed up with researchers at the universities in each city we studied, and data collection was often carried out by local students. We combined quantitative and qualitative methods, beginning with a survey in each city. This research has allowed us to explore many aspects of urban migration in Africa, particularly as it pertains to people from conflict-affected countries. (We did not specifically select refugees or asylum seekers but rather people who came from selected refugee-sending countries).

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MIGRATION PATTERNS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE REST OF AFRICA

The 54 countries of Africa have always been characterized by extensive cross-border and internal migration. Usually this migration occurs within sub-regions of Africa—such as the Horn (Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia), West Africa, and Southern Africa (including the countries of the Southern African Development Community [SADC]: Angola, Botswana, the DRC, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe). Each region has at least one magnet country, although this can change. For example, the Ivory Coast was traditionally a labor-importing country for West Africa, until civil unrest and conflict broke out there in 2004, and the economy collapsed. Labor in-migration has now largely been replaced by the distress migration of thousands of Ivorian IDPs and refugees. In Southern Africa, legal border crossings have dramatically increased in the last decade. South Africa has experienced an annual increase of visitors from other SADC countries from around 1 million in the early 1990s to over 5 million by 2005.⁸ In addition to Africans from other parts of the continent,

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the influx includes non-African tourists, businesspeople, and even asylum seekers from Asia and Bosnia.

In one of the few recent comprehensive studies of migration within and out of Africa, Robert E.B. Lucas shows that “an unusual feature of international migration in sub-Saharan Africa is its instability over time.” Among the countries with the highest coefficient of variation in net migration rates from 1950 to 2000, the top four overall, and 22 of the top 50, are in sub-Saharan Africa.⁹ Many countries in sub-Saharan Africa alternate between being net immigration and net emigration areas, the fluctuation caused by a combination of economic migration and complex emergencies. Mozambique, for instance, experienced high net out-migration in the late 1980s, followed by high average in-migration during the 1990s. Out-migration was caused by longstanding patterns of labor migration, particularly to the gold mines in South Africa, and by the civil war in Mozambique (1975 to 1990), which led to high refugee outflows. As peace and relative prosperity took hold in Mozambique, out-migration lessened and immigration increased, prompted in part by refugee inflows from

neighboring countries such as Burundi and the DRC. Similar patterns can be traced to many countries with highly variable migration rates, stemming from disasters (such as famine in Ethiopia) or civil war causing out-migration, followed by periods of peace leading to in-migration. Table 2 profiles migration rates in some of the key migration countries of Africa.

TABLE 2

*Net Migration Rates Per Thousand Population: 1975 to 2000*¹⁰

	1975–1980	1980–1985	1985–1990	1990–1995	1995–2000
Mozambique	1.54	-5.89	-19.46	9.79	1.01
Burundi	-2.83	4.33	-0.11	-8.6	-13.02
Ethiopia	-11.77	3.21	3.54	3.35	-0.15
Somalia	59.79	-25.37	-16.06	-21.86	1.71
South Africa	0.54	1.16	0.25	0.81	-0.16
Ghana	-10.77	3.4	-0.42	0.49	-1.19
Sierra Leone	0	0	3.29	-18.68	-5.19

Source: R.E.B. Lucas (2005)

Migration analysts tend to differentiate between labor or economic “voluntary” migration and the flow of refugees and IDPs who are seen as “forced” migrants. This distinction is supported by the relatively good data on refugees from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) statistics division, compared with the uneven and non-comparable migration data usually obtained from government censuses and other sources, both of which are highly variable in quality. The conceptual difficulties in distinguishing between “forced” and “voluntary” migration are well known. In addition to the people who are forced to migrate because of individual persecution, war, or human rights abuses, many more are forced to migrate because their livelihoods have been destroyed as a result of conflict, often combined with environmental problems. When drought coincides with conflict, as has been the case in Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, and elsewhere, people are unable to plant or harvest their crops, stores of seed and grain supplies are destroyed or used up too quickly, and “distress migration” often ensues. These migrants would not fit official definitions of refugees, but their decision to migrate is hardly “voluntary.” At the same time, however, there are large numbers of people who do not migrate, even when it would appear that their situation is very dangerous or life-threatening. In all migration, choices are exercised and it is difficult to assign a label of “forced” or “voluntary” on the basis of the group to which the migrants belong.

The second issue to bear in mind relates to the permanence of migration. While some migrants seek to make their destination countries their permanent places of residence, migration is often circular—people come for a specific purpose (asylum, trade, business, or education), then return to their home countries, perhaps later to repeat the process. Some people also engage in what Nicholas Van Hear has called “stepping stone” migration, where a first-stop country is used as a jumping-off point to more desirable destination countries—sometimes in the West and sometimes elsewhere in Africa.¹¹ For example, both refugees and labor migrants from other African countries use Mozambique as a staging area to make the crossing to South Africa. If they are deported, Mozambique becomes a place to wait for second and third chances to try again. In turn, migrants use South Africa as a place to earn enough money to make the jump to more desirable receiving countries like those in North America or Europe. This pattern is found in many cities, such as Cairo—used by Sudanese and Somali refugees both as a place of asylum and as a potential stepping stone to points west.¹²

In the Johannesburg part of our African Cities study,¹³ we found that half of the migrants we interviewed considered going somewhere other than South Africa when they first made the decision to leave their homes. Of these, 62 percent considered going to North America or Europe, some 10 percent considered going elsewhere in Africa, while about 12 percent reported “having no plan.”¹⁴ This suggests that some migrants saw South Africa as a stepping stone or stopping place to accumulate resources to continue their journeys. When asked their motivations for choosing South Africa as a destination, about one-third (35 percent) said work and education, and another 35 percent mentioned political, religious, or ethnic freedoms. Eleven percent indicated that South Africa might enable them to be resettled or allow them to get to a third country.

SOCIETAL RESPONSES: THE PROBLEM OF XENOPHOBIA

In most countries, estimates of undocumented migrants are notorious for their methodologically unsound basis, and the public often believes the proportion of foreigners, particularly undocumented ones, to be much higher than official estimates or census data indicate. In South Africa, Crush *et al.* find that South Africans believe that 25 percent of their population is foreign, but the figure is probably closer to 3 to 5 percent, with around 500,000 undocumented migrants.¹⁵ Inaccurate information is often coupled with xenophobia and anti-foreigner attitudes. In my frequent visits to South Africa, I have observed, as a discomfiting reminder of apartheid times, that in general, South Africans, black and white, tend not to recog-

nize differences among foreign African migrants, viewing them all as “illegals.” Although the concept of a “refugee” is accorded some sympathy, there is little recognition that refugees are entitled to different treatment from other migrants, and for the most part refugees are lumped in with other foreigners—all are subject to a virulent mix of xenophobia, ignorance of their origins, and prejudice about their role and impact in South Africa. In general, migrants are seen as a threat and a burden and rarely as beneficial to the economy. Migrants are seen as responsible for or contributing to South Africa’s three most serious problems: disease (especially AIDS), unemployment, and crime. In our Johannesburg study, 70 percent of the South Africans we interviewed thought crime in the city was increasing, and almost three-quarters of them said that immigrants were among the primary causes.¹⁶

Our research indicates that migrants are more likely to be *victims* of crime or police harassment than South Africans.¹⁷ Almost three-quarters (72 percent) of the migrants we surveyed

in Johannesburg reported that they or someone they live with has been a victim of crime, compared with 43 percent of South Africans (who have spent most of their lives in the country).¹⁸ Moreover, police appear to be contributing to the problem. When asked if the police had ever stopped them, 71 percent of migrants said yes, compared with fewer than 30 percent of South Africans. When police stop people to check immigration and identity documents, migrants reported having their papers taken and even destroyed by the police, and many spoke of paying bribes to avoid arrest and possible deportation.¹⁹

While xenophobia and problems with police harassment occur elsewhere in Africa, as reported for example in cities like Nairobi,²⁰ it is remarkable how much media and scholarly attention it has received in South Africa. A Google search of “xenophobia in Africa” revealed well over 30 pages of reports, almost all of which were devoted to South Africa.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: ASPECTS OF MIGRATION POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA AND OTHER AFRICAN COUNTRIES

During the apartheid years, the South African government actively

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recruited white immigrants, giving them many economic incentives. Since the end of apartheid, as illustrated in Table 3, South African immigration policy has emphasized border control and restrictions, making work permits and permanent residence very difficult to obtain even for skilled migrants.

TABLE 3

*Legal Immigration and Labor Migration to South Africa, 1990 to 2000*²¹

YEAR	LEGAL IMMIGRATION TO SOUTH AFRICA		TEMPORARY LEGAL LABOR MIGRATION TO SOUTH AFRICA		
	IMMIGRANTS LEGAL	AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS	NEW WORK PERMITS	RENEWALS	TOTAL
1990	14,499	1,628	7,657	30,915	38,571
1995	5,064	1,343	11,053	32,838	43,891
2000	3,669	980	6,643	9,191	15,834

With the notable exception of Botswana, which has adopted an open skills migration policy in which skilled migrants are encouraged and enabled to work, other SADC countries have also pursued restrictive immigration policies. Crush *et al.* point out that these policies are at odds with the realities of globalization and global skills markets as well as local economic development needs. To its own detriment, the SADC (with the obvious exception of Botswana and perhaps South Africa in the future) is in significant danger of becoming a seller but never a buyer in this marketplace. Events such as the decimation of workforce by HIV-AIDS may force a rethink, but for now it appears that most countries are more prepared to try and prevent the exodus of skilled nationals than to adopt proactive immigration policies to attract economic immigrants from other jurisdictions in order to stimulate growth and employment.²²

In many African countries, including South Africa, the combination of immigration restrictions and anti-foreigner attitudes has created a political and social climate that fails to address the integration and rights of migrants. Migrant rights, which include residence status and access to citizenship, are an important part of the social fabric. But, as Landau argues, the stipulation of these rights in a country's constitution is not sufficient; rights must be implemented and made available to those for whom they were intended.²³ For migrants, having legal rights, backed up by appropriate documentation that can be used to demonstrate the owner's legality to authorities, is essential to accessing health and education services as well as adequate housing. It is also critical to the ability to function in labor markets. A lack of migrant rights has implications for urban society as well.

Migrants who are not permitted to become full members of society are more likely to become an underclass that engages in illicit activity to survive. As William Rogers Brubaker argues, it is in the interests of democratic societies to extend membership to as many of its denizens as possible.²⁴

One example of how the non-extension of rights to migrants is not in the interests of a democratic society and how lack of rights can increase human insecurity for nationals is the problem of HIV-AIDS. After years of inaction and bizarre attitudes towards the pandemic, the South African government began rolling out free antiretroviral (ARV) treatment in 2004. In addition, many South Africans living with HIV are now able to access social grants, making a more normal life possible. But as illustrated in a recent Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) article,²⁵ this possibility is not extended to undocumented immigrants. Many undocumented migrants are too fearful of arrest even to seek treatment at government hospitals and clinics, and those who do and who test positive for HIV are not eligible for treatment. They are often turned away without receiving information about alternative options, because only South African citizens and refugees with the appropriate paperwork can receive treatment. Religious organizations, such as Nazareth House, and a few nongovernmental organizations provide ARV treatment to undocumented migrants,²⁶ but this is insufficient to address the large numbers of untreated individuals now living in South Africa. This is clearly a serious policy issue, which, if neglected, can only add to the HIV-AIDS problem in South Africa.

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In an African context, which migration policies could serve national interests without compromising the rights of migrants? As the AIDS example above shows, clearly there are situations where depriving migrants of their rights creates or aggravates national problems. Given the circular nature of intra-African migration and migrants' strong transnational linkages with their homes, what happens to migrants in destination countries like South Africa has implications for their home countries in the rest of Africa.

When migrants are subject to state harassment and public xenophobia or deprived of documentation and therefore assistance, they are not

deterred from migration, but the benefits of their entrepreneurial skills and energy are lost or minimized. To date, the migration policies of African countries have resembled those of the West; migrants are seen as threats and problems, and policies are based on the perceived need to control borders, reduce inflows, and prevent migrants from competing with nationals. But the economic needs of African countries—lack of skills, need for entrepreneurial innovation, and investment—differ from those of the West, and migration policies should take these differences into account.

It is possible to see intra-African migration in a more positive light, recognizing that migrants bring benefits in the form of needed skills and energy or transnational links to other markets both in Africa and abroad, and policymakers should recognize these benefits. Casting intra-African migration in a more positive light is not to deny that migrants can bring problems and even threats. There is some evidence that migrants have higher

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rates of AIDS,²⁷ and as discussed above, without proper care this can be a problem for the destination country. (But with circular migration, it can be more of a problem for the sending country when migrants return with the disease.) Migration policy should be based on an understanding of what migrants bring to the country—and the negative should be managed so as to take advantage of the positive. “Managing the negative” means focusing particular attention on problem areas such as the links between migration and the spread of AIDS or the extent to which migrants are either

the perpetrators or the victims of crime and trafficking. “Taking advantage of the positive” means encouraging and enabling migrants to pursue economic activities that meet the needs of the country.

As the research develops on these issues, we will have a deeper understanding of what is at stake and the possible entry points for policy interventions. As with all policy matters, the issue is whether the political will exists on the part of the authorities to devise and implement appropriate and productive policy measures. The migrant-related challenges confronting South Africa have a long history, and the current government has many other priorities, as do other African governments. The way South Africa confronts these challenges will surely set an example for other African countries. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 After the Soweto Uprising in 1976, South Africa experienced widespread civil unrest and resistance to apartheid rule, especially in the townships. As violent resistance grew, the government declared a state of emergency in 1985. The constitution was suspended and new security laws gave the state sweeping powers to detain people, censor the media, and employ extraordinary measures to crush protests in "unrest areas". In 1990, the Emergency ended when F.W. de Klerk became the State President, removed the ban on anti-apartheid parties like the African National Congress, and later released Nelson Mandela.
- 2 Reuters, "Some Senegalese Sent Back Home By Spain Blame Their Government," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2006, Section 1, Page 3.
- 3 Marcello Balbo and Giovanna Marconi, "Governing International Migration in the City of the South," *Global Migration Perspectives* 38 (September 2005).
- 4 Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects: The 2005 Revision*, <<http://esa.un.org/unup>> (accessed October 4, 2006).
- 5 See Jonathan Crush, Sally Peberdy, and Vincent Williams, "International Migration and Good Governance in the Southern African Region," *Southern African Migration Project Migration Policy Brief* 17 (2006); and Pieter Kok and M. Collinson, *Migration and Urbanization in South Africa* (Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2006).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 See Crush *et al.*; Balbo and Marconi; and Robert E.B. Lucas, "Migration and Economic Development in Africa: A Review of Evidence" (paper prepared for the African Economic Research Consortium Biannual Research Workshop, Nairobi, Kenya, May 28-June 2, 2005).
- 8 Crush *et al.*, 8.
- 9 Lucas, 2.
- 10 Table data from Lucas, 3. As Lucas notes, data on migration for all African countries is sparse and unreliable, and after 2000 it is difficult to piece together comparative data sets. The data in this table should be viewed as illustrative rather than definitive, given the unreliability and non-comparability of data across countries.
- 11 Nicholas Van Hear, 'I went as far as my money would take me:' *Conflict, Forced Migration, and Class*, Working Paper No. 6, Center on Migration, Policy and Society, Oxford University, 2004, <www.compas.ox.ac.uk/publications/papers/WP0406.pdf> (accessed October 26, 2006).
- 12 Katarzyna Grabska, "Marginalization in Urban Spaces of the Global South: Urban Refugees in Cairo," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19 (3) (September 2006): 287-307.
- 13 The survey was conducted in early 2003. Of the 737 respondents, 53 percent (392 people) were South Africans and 47 percent (345) were migrants—14 percent from the DRC, 12 percent from Angola, nine percent from Ethiopia, eight percent from Somalia, two percent from the Republic of Congo, and one percent from Burundi. The survey was repeated in 2006, but data are not yet available at this writing. All evidence reported in this article is taken from Loren B. Landau and Karen Jacobsen, "Refugees in the New Johannesburg," *Forced Migration Review* 19 (January 2004): 44-46.
- 14 Landau and Jacobsen, 19.
- 15 Crush *et al.*, 15.
- 16 Landau and Jacobsen, 19.
- 17 D. Mistry and A. Minnaar, "Foreign Migrants as Victims of Crime in South Africa: A Case Study in the Gauteng Township of Khutsong" (paper prepared for the Tenth International Symposium on Victimology: Beyond Boundaries: Research and Action for the Third Millennium, Montreal, Canada, August 6-11, 2000), <www.crimeinstitute.ac.za/abstract.htm>
- 18 Landau and Jacobsen, 19.
- 19 Loren B. Landau, "Protection and Dignity in Johannesburg: Shortcomings of South Africa's Urban Refugee Policy," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19 (3) (September 2006): 308-327.

- 20 Elizabeth H. Campbell, "Urban Refugees in Nairobi: Problems of Protection, Mechanisms of Survival, and Possibilities for Integration," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19 (3) (September 2006): 396-413.
- 21 From Crush *et al.*, 12 (citing Department of Home Affairs annual reports).
- 22 Crush *et al.*, 14.
- 23 Landau 2006.
- 24 William Rogers Brubaker, "Membership Without Citizenship: The Economic and Social Rights of Noncitizens," in William R. Brubaker, ed., *Immigration and the Politics of Citizenship in Europe and North America* (Lanham, MD: The German Marshall Fund of the United States and University Press of America, 1989), 145-62.
- 25 IRIN Reports, "Positive Immigrants," *IRINnews.org*, May 2, 2006, <www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=53115> (accessed October 26, 2006).
- 26 At Nazareth House, the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC) uses funding from President Bush's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and has been providing ARV treatment to anyone who needs it since early 2004. In all of South Africa, the SACBC is providing ARVs to about 7,000 patients (see *IRINnews.org*, May 2, 2006).
- 27 Crush *et al.*, 25.