

Finding a New Life in the “City of Roses”

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns
Bloemfontein, South Africa

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Contents

Location 3

Introduction 4

Methods 5

A Note on Terminology 7

Mapping the Refugee Population..... 7

The Urban Impact..... 9

Finding Work in Urban Areas 10

Refugees’ Entrepreneurial Skills 10

Strong Social Connections..... 13

Education Experience 13

Successes & Challenges with Integration into Society 14

Documentation of Migrants in MMM..... 15

Conclusion..... 15

References 16

Appendix A: Migrants in South Africa..... 17

Appendix B: Migrants in Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality (MMM) 18

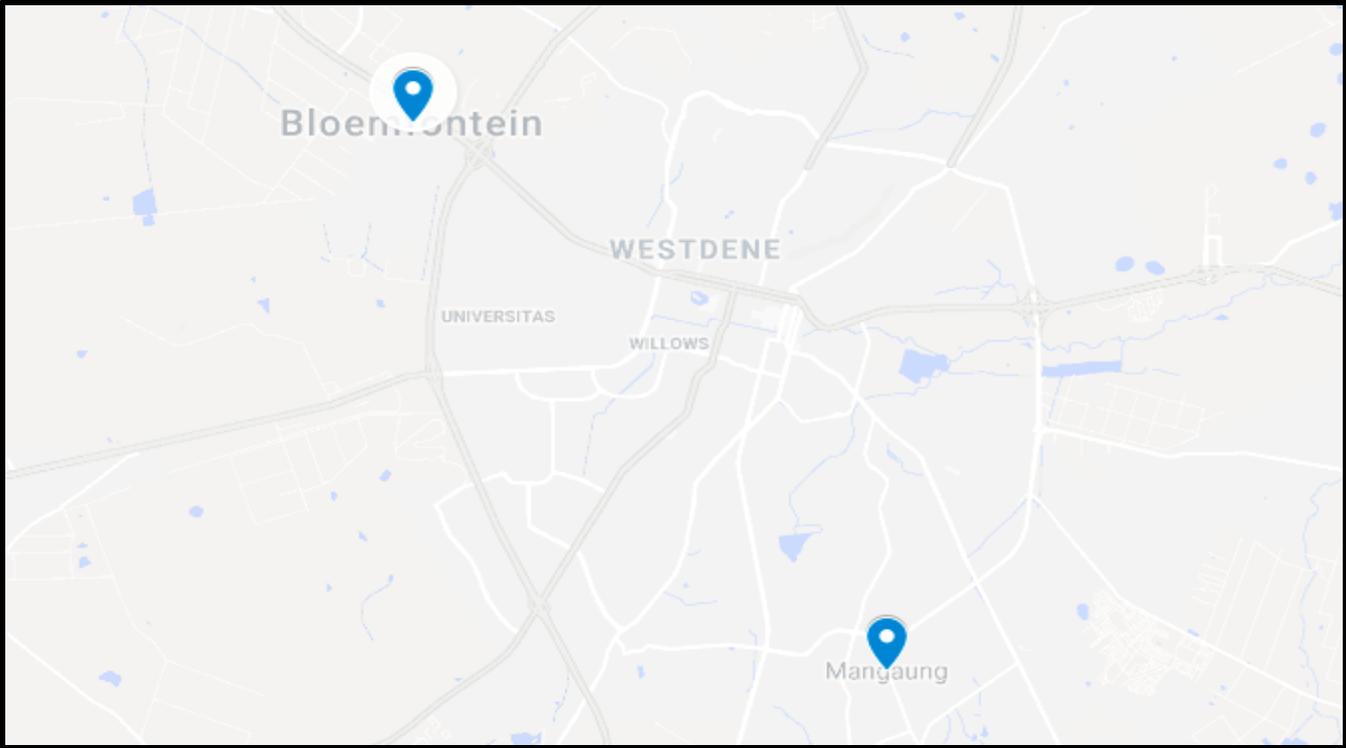
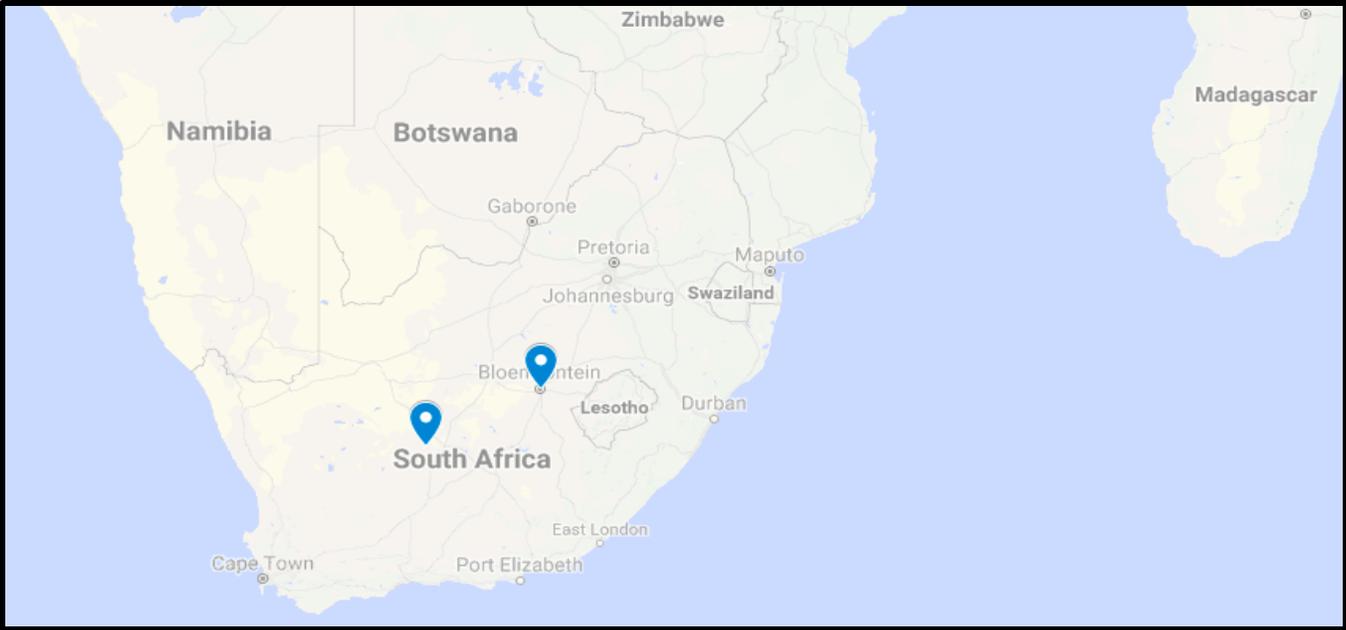
About the RIT Project 19

About the Author 20

Cover: A street view of Bloemfontein, known as the “City of Roses.” All photos by the author.

Location

For more background on South Africa and Bloemfontein, continue to the appendices.



South Africa and MMM (above); central Bloemfontein and downtown Mangaung (below).

Introduction

I moved to South Africa from Zimbabwe in 2008, to Bloemfontein of Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality in Free State province.¹ As a postgraduate student, I shared university residence with other postgraduate students from Lesotho, Botswana, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). There were many other students and professionals at the university from Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Ghana, India, Cameroon, Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, Namibia, Mozambique, DRC, and of course South Africa, who were in the majority. This reflects the mixed population in Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality. I soon observed some racial divides that emerged because the university is bilingual: teaching and learning are conducted in English and Afrikaans, so the students are separated by language and therefore do not have time to socialize across language groups. These racial divisions are still visible even today, though there are calls for transformation from tertiary study institutions in South Africa.²

I myself had no difficulty integrating into Mangaung society as my life revolved around the many foreigners that were close to me and a few locals, all of whom spoke the South African languages I understood very well: Ndebele, Xhosa, and Zulu. I bought from shops owned by both migrants and hosts. I also bought products from multinational conglomerates like Pick and Pay, Woolworths, or Truworths—the shops that dominate the South African retail sector—as well as the shops owned by foreigners like food wholesalers, and got my hair done at foreign-owned hair salons (Ghanaian, Zimbabwean, or Congolese). My neighbor was a foreigner, I regularly dined at a restaurant whose wait staff was all foreign, attended church with a foreign pastor, and sat next to a foreign co-worker in school parent meetings.

What struck me most was that there were so many of us foreigners in this town. It is against this background that I undertook this case study to establish the successes and the ongoing challenges of refugees and other migrants in Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality (MMM) of Free State Province. I'm not only interested in the presence of migrants, but also the long-term viability of integration over generations. For example, while it was easy for me to integrate, it was not easy for me to find primary schools for my children because most primary schools offer basic education only in Afrikaans.

This report covers many areas of integration, from businesses, to schools, to social events.

¹ Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality (MMM) includes Bloemfontein and surrounding areas but refers to Bloemfontein City, which is the capital of the Free State Province.

² "Transformation" involves the change of previous discourse, which was racially biased towards the white minority to the current discourse of inclusivity in diversity by making English the only medium of teaching and learning.

Methods

Entering this project, I was already a part of a large migrant community, who all went to university here and are now working in MMM. For this report, I analyzed how migrants are integrating into the society despite the challenges that are also affecting local South Africans. I used qualitative research: participant observation and unstructured interviews with 16 women and 10 men. These individuals were part of my social network or referred by friends and colleagues.

Gender position often has a significant impact on qualitative research, but in this case, I felt being female did not present an issue in terms of speaking with members of the opposite sex, and I was able to interact with all groups of people.

During the research some migrants were reluctant to talk about their experiences. The reasons ranged from excuses such as “I am too busy,” “I have to work to earn a living,” or “I am not a foreigner.” I think they feared stigmatization or being excluded from some of their social connections who might have thought they divulged their secrets to an outsider by talking to me. The women who were working for their compatriots in salons and retail shops were especially reluctant to talk. One of them said the reason for this could be that individuals have to show allegiance to the people who helped them migrate to South Africa, and not speak to outsiders. Others only opened up after they found out that I am also a migrant. The 26 people I interviewed hailed from 9 countries, as shown here.

| Country of origin | Respondents | Occupation | Age(s) |
|-------------------|-------------------|---|--------|
| Ethiopia | 1 woman | Widow | ~30 |
| Eritrea | 1 woman, 1 man | Wife and shop owner Senior researcher | ~40 |
| Kenya | 1 woman | Insurance broker | ~30 |
| Lesotho | 1 woman | Hairdresser | ~30 |
| Rwanda | 1 woman | Volunteer in a missionary institution | ~30 |
| Zimbabwe | 11 women 2 men | Post doc, housewife, entrepreneur, hairdresser, director, vendors (3), stall attendant Professor / retiree/ IT | 18-49 |
| Nigeria | 4 men | Senior lecturer, senior researcher, post doc, pastor | 30-49 |
| Cameroon | 2 men | PhD student, senior lecturer | 18-59 |
| Ghana | 1 man | Lecturer | ~20 |

The Author's Position in the Town and Experiences Researching this Case

I moved to MMM in 2008, first to complete my postgraduate degree and later to pursue work opportunities as my country of origin had not been spared in the 2007-2008 global financial crisis. Before my move to MMM, I had visited South Africa briefly as a part-time student and also as a tourist in places like Durban, East London, Johannesburg, and Pretoria. I had never thought of moving permanently to South Africa, let alone to MMM.

When I arrived in MMM, I stayed near the university in a suburb called Brandwag, sharing a flat with Malawian and Nigerian colleagues. When I started working for the university I worked with a team of Zimbabwean, South African (black, Indian, and white), and Lesotho nationals. The diverse composition of the staff was due to the international nature of our program. Our students came from all over Africa, and beyond. Fifteen African countries were represented: Zimbabwe, South Africa, Lesotho, Zambia, Namibia, Mozambique, Swaziland, Kenya, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Cameroon, Uganda, Congo, and Malawi.

Outside work, I attended church with locals and foreigners and was part of a number of informal social support networks, including weekend hangouts and savings clubs (referred to as *stokvels*³ in South Africa). One day I read in a local newspaper that there are more than 3 million Zimbabweans in South Africa, and this statistic sparked my interest in migration and integration of migrants in host populations. I knew relatives, friends, and colleagues from Zimbabwe who had migrated to South Africa and other destinations globally. Being a migrant myself I found it easier to interact with many people including locals. I am fluent in a number of South African languages, thanks to my ancestral roots. My ancestry also provided me personal evidence that migration in this region is not new: in the early 1800s the *Mfecane War*⁴ displaced my ancestors, who finally in settled in a city called Bulawayo in Zimbabwe in 1838.

³ A *Stokvel* is an informal savings pool or syndicate, usually among Black people, in which funds are contributed in rotation, allowing participants lump sums for family needs especially funerals (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017).

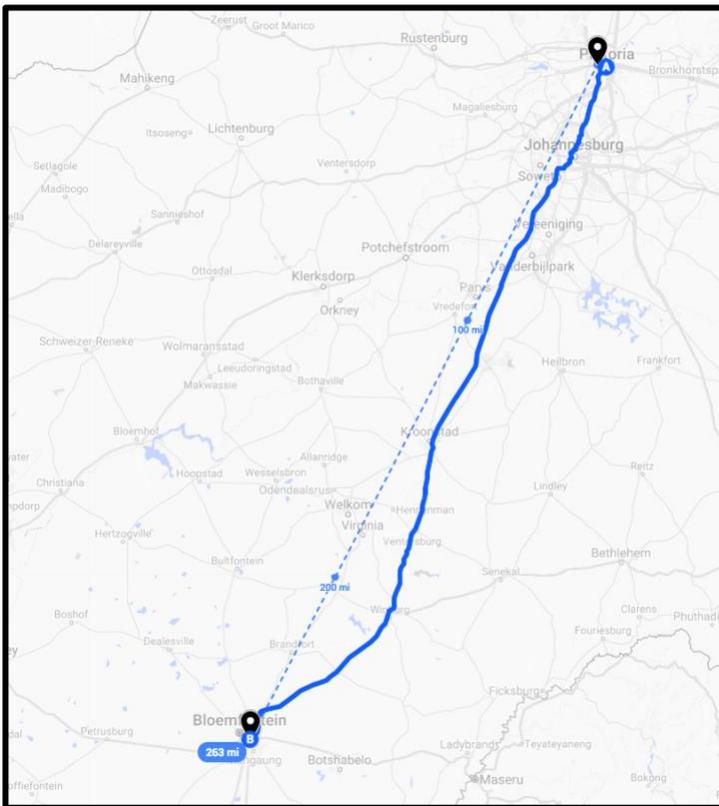
⁴ The large-scale dispersal of groups of northern Nguni people during the early 19th century to the south, north, and west.

A Note on Terminology

For this report, I use the general term “migrants” because in South Africa, the distinction between migrant categories is not clear: all foreigners are called migrants, and they do not differentiate themselves according to type of residence status. *Makwerekwere* is slang for foreigners from sub-Saharan Africa, and *Amakhula* is slang for foreigners who are of Indian origin or look like Indians, for example Ethiopians, Eritreans, Somalis, and Bangladeshis are grouped together in the public mind as “Indian” origin. The terms *Makwerekwere* and *Amakhula* are also derogatory terms used by locals to indicate their prejudice and superiority over other nationalities.

Mapping the Refugee Population

Map of Distance Pretoria to MMM



Map 1: The journey from Bloemfontein to the registration office in Pretoria is over 250 miles (400 km), requiring a full day of travel and significant costs for bus tickets.

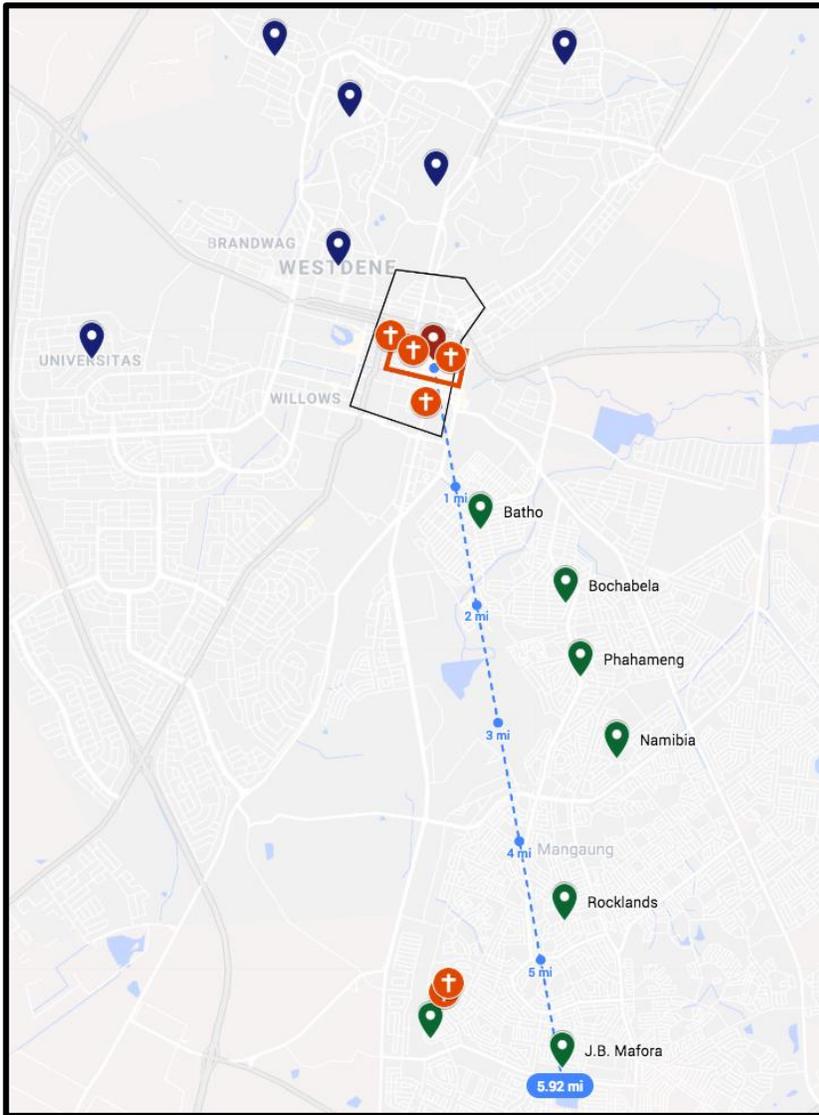
Base map imagery © Google 2019.

According to a survey conducted by Statistics South Africa (2016), in Free State there are 53,433 legally documented international immigrants, accounting for 3.4% of the country’s total immigrants. Of these, 740 are in Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality.⁵

From my personal experience, the above figure is very conservative. I have come across many migrants and refugees who were once documented but are now living in the country without documents due to the challenges of legalizing one’s residence status in South Africa. Migrants have to travel long distances to Pretoria to renew their permits, which requires time and money. It gets even more expensive if the renewals must happen often; for instance, an immigration officer can decide whether they will renew a permit for one to three or for six months, meaning migrants may have to travel to and from Pretoria as often as twelve times per year.

⁵ Stats SA, Census 2011.

Map of Refugees and Services in MMM



Map 2: Map of MMM: City center (red point), Central Business District (CBD, orange outline), central Bloemfontein (black outline), residential suburbs (blue points), residential townships (green points, the farthest from the city center being 6 miles away, 10km), and religious sites (orange points). *Base map imagery © Google 2019.*

After arriving at a registration office, migrants say that they are often turned back and told to return the following day regardless of the fact that they are coming from far away. The Red Cross said that they try to assist refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, though it is difficult in the Bloemfontein office because they lack knowledge of the services available to them at the local level.

Residential areas in MMM are racially divided. The black majority reside in the townships and the white minority reside in the suburbs. Migrants reside, work, and have businesses in different suburbs and townships. Migrants mostly reside in the Central Business District (CBD) of Bloemfontein, which is also the medium- to low-income business hub of the city. Living in the CBD are mostly Nigerians, Ghanaians, Cameroonians, Somalis, Ethiopians, Malawis, DRC nationals, Congolese, Ethiopians, Bangladeshis, and Lesotho nationals.

Some well-educated, highly-skilled migrants are found in the affluent residential areas which were previously reserved for the white population. These are suburbs like Universitas, Dan Pienaar, Bayswater, Woodlands, Heuwelsig and Waverley. These migrants are from China, Greece, Taiwan, Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Cameroon, Sudan, Lesotho, DRC, Ghana, Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Somali, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Senegal, and Mozambique just to mention a few.

Some others, especially Zimbabweans, Lesotho nationals, Ethiopians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis reside in the townships like Batho, Bochabela, J.B.Mafora, Phahameng, Namibia, Rocklands, and Blomanda. Some of these migrants reside at the back of their business premises, especially in Botshabelo and Thaba Nchu enclaves.⁶

As you can see, both migrants and services are at once segregated and highly distributed throughout the city, not clustered in one particular neighborhood.

The Urban Impact

The most noticeable urban impact on Bloemfontein is from the numerous small businesses owned by migrants. These businesses include furniture shops, grocery outlets, wholesale shops, and hair salons in the townships and in the CBD (see map above). Some also own mobile businesses whereby they move from place to place selling their goods or sit on the street corners to offer services. Migrant businesses are absent in the affluent malls, except the big operations owned by whites from Europe, the Middle East, and America and who are not considered migrants because South Africans think of “migrants” as black and African, not white and Western.

Of interest to the stability of these businesses is the long historical links with Lesotho⁷ that have meant locals are normalized to the presence of migrants and co-exist peacefully with them. Xenophobic attacks, especially against foreign business owners, are not as pronounced here as in other areas such as Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg. However, there have been some violent xenophobic attacks especially on foreign business owners in the townships. This occurred when the municipality removed illegal local traders from the streets who were in competition with legally operating migrant shops. In response, the locals descended on foreign shops and burned, looted, and beat up the shop owners.

In conversations, locals in the townships indicated their appreciation of foreigners as they bring development to the city. They provide scarce skills, employment, and sell affordable retail goods at the doorsteps of the low-income population who used to struggle to access and afford them in the CBD or the affluent shopping malls. Migrants’ entrepreneurial strength is admired by locals. However, some locals turn these positives into negatives in the form of xenophobic attacks due to jealousy, as many refugee businesses perform better than similar South African-owned ones.

⁶ Homeland was a territory set aside for black inhabitants of South Africa and South West Africa (now Namibia), as part of the policy of apartheid. Thaba Nchu is a dormitory town of Bloemfontein and former Bantu Homeland.

⁷ A small neighboring country that is ethnically Basotho.

Finding Work in Urban Areas



Figure 1: Migrants working on street corners

Migrants from ten countries in sub-Saharan Africa are allowed permits to reside in South Africa for business, work, relatives, retirement, study, tourism, or asylum. Refugees are usually already equipped with jobs skills when they first arrive in Bloemfontein, such as hairdressing, knitting, weaving, and entrepreneurial abilities nurtured in their home countries. Bloemfontein CBD's streets are lined with migrants' thriving salons and shops. Outlets sell cuisines and attire from migrants' countries of origin, helping migrants become both economically and socially integrated.

Refugees' Entrepreneurial Skills

Refugees and migrants here have a knack for entrepreneurialism, putting money together to buy goods in bulk from wholesalers at discounted rates and then selling the goods at cheaper prices than the local traders. Nigerians in Bloemfontein are well known for their distinctive clothing, which has become popular among locals, in part because Nigerians stand out as migrants who are hardworking and good at handicrafts.⁸ There are many Nigerian shops and restaurants especially in the CBD. The local Sotho people are well known for their traditional attire *shweshwe*⁹ including their famous Basotho blankets. Basotho women, men, and children all have some form of traditional outfit. There is now a new fashion made up of *Shweshwe* and Nigerian *Ankara*¹⁰ fabric that is becoming a brand name in South Africa and beyond.

⁸ However, there are also some negative stereotypes about Nigerians. See Ojong, 2002.

⁹ *Shweshwe* is a printed dyed cotton fabric widely used for traditional South African clothing.

¹⁰ *Ankara* is usually a colorful cloth and is primarily associated with Africa because of its tribal-like patterns and motifs.



Figure 2: Outfits made from Nigerian and Basotho materials.

Photo from the company owner, used with permission.



Figure 3: A typical shop owned by migrants

Migrants use open spaces to advertise and sell products. Products may be available in person or can be ordered and delivered later. Some migrants also sell goods that are not displayed for fear of law enforcement agents; for example, skin lightening products.

Migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Lesotho reside in the low-income, densely populated suburbs in South Africa, usually called “locations,”¹¹ where they start their own small businesses. Here, women work in groups along the streets to plait hair and sell goods. Some migrants engage in the transportation business, moving people’s goods from shops to their houses, or from house to house. This is a lucrative business as it is the least problematic way to move one’s stuff, and to enter this

Similar to Nigerians, migrants from Cameroon, Senegal, Malawi, Ghana, DRC, Angola, and Zimbabwe have talents such as handcrafting clothing, basketry, and hairdressing. There are many hairdressers, fast-food outlets, furniture shops, grocery shops, and designer clothing shops owned by women from Eritrea, Somalia, Ghana, DRC, Congo-Brazzaville, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. These entrepreneurs employ both their compatriots and local South Africans in their businesses. Many use the personal connections they had prior to migrating to South Africa to get an economic edge.

Ghanaian migrants, for example, recruit fellow co-nationals in Ghana and facilitate their migration to South Africa to work in their hairdressing salons. Conversations in the salons in Bloemfontein revealed that there was a strong belief by South Africans and other African migrants that Ghanaians were the best hairdressers and that they were very innovative with hairstyling, especially in natural African hairstyles.

Congolese from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Congo-Brazzaville also specialize in hairdressing and some have hair products in their shops. They engage in selling beauty products, including skin lightening creams which are in great demand in South Africa. Women from Ivory Coast, Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Mauritius, Uganda, and Benin also have their own businesses or are formally employed in South Africa.

¹¹ In Bloemfontein it is mainly the black population that reside in “locations.” *Township* means a designated area or district where the mainly low-income people reside.

succeeding.” This attitude of migrants is something hosts may emulate for their own gain. In my opinion, the entrepreneurship mentality of migrant women especially is a skill that local South African women should adopt for their own advantage.

Strong Social Connections

Migrants in South Africa and in Bloemfontein have strong personal connections based on their roots in their home countries that open up regional economic opportunities. Up until very recently, for example, Zimbabweans would use informal associations to send goods and people back to their home countries, with Johannesburg as the exit point. However, in the last three years, transport has gotten easier with the rise of buses that ply the Bloemfontein–Zimbabwe route with goods for migrants in Bloemfontein. Trading goods is the main link Zimbabweans have with their home country. Peberdy (2000) noted the extent of these informal trading networks in southern Africa years ago. Old and new entrants into these networks handle informal money transfers and move goods and passengers all over. This trade is termed *Malayitsha* business, meaning “one who carries a heavy load.”

This trade supports the economic wellbeing of migrants in South Africa and reinforces social ties with home countries as people can also use the trade routes to travel to and from South Africa. Unaccompanied minors and elderly people who need assistance to travel utilize these informal services based on trust with the bus service provider rooted in being co-nationals.

Education Experience

The conversations I had with the migrants working at the university indicated that many from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and DRC already have undergraduate qualifications and decide to either redo the undergraduate degree or start a level lower in order to easily integrate to South Africa. After they graduate, many continue to pursue postgraduate studies and attain doctoral degrees that enable them to get permanent residence status in academic professionals. Therefore a number of them are employed as academic staff at the University of the Free State and Central University of Technology in Bloemfontein. Others obtain qualifications in business management and later open South African businesses that they manage.

Successes & Challenges with Integration into Society

The economic benefits migrants bring may be a reason for the minimal racism experienced in Bloemfontein: “They need us because when they need goods and services, they look to us,” said a female migrant from Zimbabwe.

In addition to the economic factors reducing racism, migrants in Bloemfontein also live physically side by side with locals. Walking down the street, it is not easy to tell if someone is a migrant or a local until speaking with them and hearing their accent. Migrants are part and parcel of the host population.

Religion provides another avenue for migrants to connect socially (see map of religious sites, above). There are many churches, especially in the CBD of Bloemfontein, that are led by migrant pastors, for instance the Christ Embassy Church, Winner’s Chapel International, Redeemed Church of God, Forward In Faith, and Devine Restoration Church. One Nigerian said that she had never experienced xenophobia because the church she attends is full of foreigners and locals, and they relate very well.

Xenophobic Attacks

Despite this general calm, there have been reports of xenophobic attacks on foreigners in MMM, especially in the townships and in Botshabelo and Thaba Nchu, which were directed at foreign-owned shops. This conflict is more economically and politically driven than socially driven, as angry locals say that foreigners are taking jobs and resources.

Locals also use migrants as scapegoats to express their dissatisfaction with the government. When there are issues with government service delivery, some locals attack migrants to attract government attention. The local government of MMM and the national government are rattled into action by these attacks, attending to policy implementation issues for hosts in order to protect the rights of migrants.

In Bloemfontein, migrants are called derogatory names like *Makwerekwere* and *Makhula*, but these incidents are infrequent. A conversation with a South African indicated that even when this derogatory name calling breaks out, locals do not get physical in their attacks, but use derogatory terms to exclude them and create a feeling of their own superiority over migrants.

Both racist slurs and violence are very infrequent here. Day to day, there is no visible animosity between locals and migrants in MMM, and incidents are particularly infrequent in areas with lower population densities. Xenophobia in Bloemfontein, for example, is minimal because the low population density means there is little pressure on the city’s resources. This contrasts with high population density areas in South Africa like the city of Johannesburg, where new migrants are constantly arriving.

Documentation of Migrants in MMM

During my doctoral studies of African migrant women in 2016, I came across a number of undocumented migrants who were illegally living in the country. They gave various reasons for their lack of documentation, such as the cumbersome process of getting documents, financial constraints of acquiring permits, and difficulty traveling to the relevant offices in Pretoria about 300 miles away (roughly 500 km). Although Bloemfontein is the provincial capital, it does not have a facility that handles asylum and refugee documentation. This is strange because it is the port of entry for the majority of the Lesotho nationals employed in the mines of South Africa. This lack of a reception center in Bloemfontein for the Lesotho nationals could be the reason why a lot of Basotho nationals were undocumented until a special permit was introduced to regularize their stay.¹³ Thousands of Angolans who were reluctant to return to their country after their civil war ended were also granted special permits. Of note are also the thousands of Zimbabwean nationals who were living illegally in South Africa until they got a reprieve through Zimbabwe Dispensation Permits (ZDP).¹⁴ The government of South Africa embarked on these programs in order to make sure that all foreigners are properly documented so that they can properly allocate resources for basic social services.

This regularization process seems to be working for many. One person I spoke with had illegally crossed the border from Zimbabwe to Bloemfontein. At the time of our interaction she had a South African identity document, her three children had birth certificates, and she was receiving social grants for them. Many of my friends, colleagues, associates, and relatives have also benefited from the above special permits and are now pursuing licit careers in South Africa. The Department of Home Affairs has alleviated a lot of suffering by issuing these permits. Prior to these permits, many people I spoke to said that they had to dodge law enforcement authorities or if confronted, pay bribes to buy their freedom and avoid deportation.

Conclusion

Overall, migrants in Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality are integrating well into the local community, especially compared with the poor living situation in some metropolitan cities like Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban.¹⁵ Locals of MMM are not hostile to migrants and there are no visible differences between locals and migrants in work environments or in social activities. There is general acceptance of migrants as the local people acknowledge the contribution that migrants make to their wellbeing and to the city's economy. Migrants enjoy the freedom to work, operate businesses, and co-exist with locals, competing for the opportunities that exist in the communities. Despite government legislation

¹³ Reitveld, 2016.

¹⁴ Moorhouse and Cunningham, 2010.

¹⁵ I witnessed the poor living conditions of many migrants here when I was conducting research, visiting compatriots and relatives in the above-mentioned cities. This characterization is verified by RIT researchers living and working in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

that protects locals—at times at migrants’ expense—there is harmony in MMM, and the South African government is introducing progressive laws to regularize the residency of many undocumented migrants.

Looking forward, the government of South Africa should look at migrants’ innovative ways of survival as a way to assist local South Africans, many of whom are grappling with unemployment and are therefore reliant on government social services such as child grants and disability grants. Meanwhile, the entrepreneurship and regional trade networks that come with migration open new opportunities for both migrants and hosts in MMM.

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Appendix A: Migrants in South Africa

The migration of Africans from neighboring countries to South Africa can be traced back to colonial and apartheid-era labor migration, especially in the mining industry.¹⁶ The majority of these migrants were from Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Swaziland. The trend has increased due to globalization. People are also increasingly migrating due to climate change, natural and manmade disasters, and socioeconomically-induced conflicts. These migrants arrive in South Africa looking for work opportunities that are no longer widely available in their home countries.

According to Statistics South Africa's 2011 census, 2.2 million foreigners live in South Africa, and the organization's 2015 estimate places the number of undocumented migrants between 500,000 and 1 million. I believe that these are conservative estimates because I have interacted with many migrants who have entered South Africa to seek refuge, and at one time were here legally, but as time went on decided to discard any documentation and opted to get South African identity documents through clandestine means such as paying bribes.

¹⁶ Crush, Williams & Peberdy, 2005.

Appendix B: Migrants in Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality (MMM)

Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality (MMM) is situated within Free State Province of South Africa. It came into being in 2011 after decree by local government elections. The main economic activities in MMM are the government, finance, and services sectors. Small businesses also play an important role in MMM's economy as they provide employment for many residents.

According to the community survey conducted by Statistics South Africa (2016), international immigrants in the Free State Province account for 3.4% of the province's 747,431 total population, which consists of 83.3% black Africans, 11% whites, and 5% non-black people of color.¹⁷ In the Free State Province, 53,433 immigrants are legally documented. Of these, 740 are in Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality.¹⁸

As a result of this diversity, the languages spoken in MMM are Sotho (53.3%), Afrikaans (16.6%), Tswana (12.6%), Xhosa (9.9%), and others (8%).¹⁹ Sotho is also the only language of Lesotho, a small nation that is surrounded by South Africa. It is also not easy to differentiate between the South African and Lesotho Sotho people as the two have strong connections through history and intermarriage. This makes it easier for Lesotho people to remain hidden in MMM than other migrants.

MMM consists of three main towns: Bloemfontein, Botshabelo, and Thaba Nchu. Bloemfontein is the capital city and economic hub of the Free State province. It is also referred to as the judicial capital of South Africa since it houses the Supreme Court of Appeal and the provincial government administration headquarters. The migrant population in the city of Bloemfontein consists of migrants from everywhere, even domestic migrants from the remote rural areas South Africa.²⁰

¹⁷ Stats SA, 2011.

¹⁸ Stats SA, Census 2011.

¹⁹ Stats SA, 2011.

²⁰ Ncube 2017.

About the RIT Project

This report is a case study of Refugees in Towns (RIT), a research project that aims to promote understanding of migrant and refugee experiences with integration—both formal and informal—in urban settings in the U.S. and around the world. Our case studies are ground in local knowledge. They are designed, conducted, and written by refugees and locals, capturing their voices and the perspectives of the communities in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen, and is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University. It is funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

First, by gathering a range of case studies we are amassing a global data base that will help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant and refugee integration. These cases reveal global differences and similarities in the factors that enable and obstruct integration, and the different ways in which migrants and hosts perceive, co-exist, adapt, and struggle with integration. We draw our case studies from towns in resettlement countries (e.g. the United States); transit countries (e.g. Greece), and countries of first asylum (e.g. Lebanon). Our long-term goal is to build a global, grounded theory of integration. Second, the RIT project seeks to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy and practice. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policies through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. and globally are responding in a range of different ways: some are resisting national policy changes by declaring themselves to be “sanctuary cities,” while others are supporting travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we need deeper understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, other migrants, and their hosts interact. Local perspectives on these processes are not well represented in the scholarship on integration: our RIT project seeks to draw on—and give voice to—both refugee and host communities in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case study reports from other towns and urban neighbourhoods round the world. Keep in touch: we regularly release more reports as our case study projects develop. There is also more information available about RIT’s researchers, goals, practical local outcomes, and theoretical analyses.

www.refugeesintowns.org

About the Author

Alice Ncube is a resident of Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality. She is Zimbabwean and has close links with many migrants and refugees in the city, living and working alongside them on a daily basis. Her doctoral studies focus on the coping and adaptation mechanisms of migrants in a host country.

Previously, she conducted research on disaster risk management, focusing on grassroots occupations through informal Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAS), paying particular attention to women as the main providers. She has worked with many local government municipalities in South Africa, and NGOs such as UNICEF, UNU-EHS, World Vision South Africa, ADRA (South Africa), Sphere Project, Trocaire, and is a volunteer for International Red Cross (Free State Province).

She holds a B.A. and Graduate Certificate in Education from University of Zimbabwe, Diploma in human resources management from the Zimbabwe Institute of Personnel Management, Post-graduate diploma in development and disaster management from the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Zimbabwe, Masters in disaster management (MDM), Post-graduate degree in gender studies (PGDGS), and Ph.D. in disaster management from the University of the Free State, South Africa. She is a volunteer with the South African Red Cross at a provincial level and has worked with NGOs, including World Vision and Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).

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