Population movement between Mozambique and South Africa is an age-old phenomenon, the outcome of colonial oppression, political upheaval and the search for employment. The late 1980s witnessed a particularly heavy influx of Mozambicans fleeing civil war. One contingent of Mozambican refugees was dumped by the apartheid-era government in the former Gazankulu Homeland (now part of Limpopo Province). The government denied them refugee status, thereby blocking their right to assistance under international law. The Gazankulu authorities – aided by the goodwill and generosity of local people and charities – did what they could. Ultimately, however, refugees had to depend on their own ingenuity. Many took advantage of lack of restrictions on movement within South Africa to search for places of permanent settlement. One such place was Tiko village.

Many refugees had relatives and friends across the border. Some came to Tiko at the prompting of recent migrants to South Africa who hired agents to smuggle them in. Relatives – usually migrant workers – played an important role in looking for paid employment, making efforts to secure positions for the newcomers at their own places of work. Some refugees headed for urban areas and towns illegally to join friends and relatives working there, finally returning to the rural settlements when the going proved too tough.

From survival to livelihood strategies

In the early days, survival was ensured by the combined efforts of the Gazankulu government, churches, charitable organisations, local villagers and, in some cases, the refugees’ own efforts. However, with time, resources dwindled and locals overstretched their capacity for philanthropy. The refugees had to intensify their efforts to sustain themselves. To this day some of the refugees continue to lead a hand-to-mouth existence. Others, however, have moved on and pursue long-term livelihood rather than short-term survival strategies.

While many practise subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry, some work in the commercial farming sector either as seasonal or permanent labourers. Others are engaged in formal and informal sector non-agricultural activities – in tourism (mainly game reserves), mining and construction. Business and trading provide further opportunities. Some refugees own commuter taxis and it is claimed that the immigrants now dominate the local commuter taxi industry, thanks to their enterprise and solidarity.

Petty trading is perhaps the most widespread informal sector activity. Many households buy and sell an assortment of merchandise including food items, handicrafts, firewood and liquor. Domestic service involving Mozambican women working for South Africans in Tiko and other villages provides an additional source of livelihood while refugee men accept poorly-paid work in construction which is rejected by South African men.

A number of the Mozambican refugees practise various forms of traditional medicine. Some are registered with the national traditional healers’ organisation as specialists in specific ailments. Mozambicans are highly reputed traditional doctors, even among South Africans, and their services are much in demand.

South Africa’s social security system is far-reaching, catering for old age...
Survival to livelihood strategies for Mozambican refugees in South Africa

pensioners, the unemployed and other categories of the disadvantaged. In 1996, the new South African government granted amnesty to all citizens of the 14 member states of the Southern African Development Community under which long-time residents in South Africa could apply for permanent residence and, subsequently, citizenship. Many refugees took up the offer and acquired the necessary documentation – thus opening the way to accessing social security benefits. Others acquired citizenship through marriage to South Africans, bribing civil servants or paying South Africans to claim them as relatives.

Remittances from relatives working in urban areas or in rural employment elsewhere – while not always regular or even sufficient to constitute an adequate basis for survival – are an important source of livelihood. Many refugees have consciously refrained from going to live or work in urban areas where living costs are high. They have opted to live in rural areas because of the opportunities for livelihood diversification and the wider scope for securing support when in difficulties.

Mutual aid characterises the lives of refugees the world over for permanent residence and, subsequently, citizenship. Many refugees took up the offer and acquired the necessary documentation – thus opening the way to accessing social security benefits. Others acquired citizenship through marriage to South Africans, bribing civil servants or paying South Africans to claim them as relatives.

Local shopkeepers extend credit facilities to many families, provided that they are employed or have a regular income and have a good repayment track record. In the absence of formal credit facilities, many would have experienced greater hardship.

Conclusion

Although they left their country of origin against a background of great uncertainty, Mozambican refugees have managed to establish self-reliant and dignified lives in their new environment. In addition to pursuing familiar livelihood strategies they have taken advantage of available opportunities to craft new ones. Their experience reminds us that refugees are not always destined to be dependent on handouts. Left to their own devices, they are able to use their ingenuity to construct and maintain sustainable livelihoods.

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1. The village name is fictitious. The study is part of a project looking at livelihoods and well-being of Mozambican refugees and their hosts, supported by the Andrew Mellon Foundation in 2001-03.

The forgotten Palestinians: how Palestinian refugees survive in Egypt

Some 50,000 Palestinian refugees live in Egypt without UN assistance or protection and burdened by many restrictive laws and regulations. Little is known about their plight and their unique status.

Palestinians fled to Egypt after the wars of 1948, 1956 and 1967. Gazans employed as civil servants when the Gaza Strip was under Egyptian administrative rule and Gazan students in Egypt when it was occupied by Israel in 1967 were also prevented from returning home. Neither group of displaced Palestinians has been protected or assisted either by UNHCR or by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) – the agency set up to assist Palestinian refugees which began operations in 1950. While UNRWA established relief and assistance projects in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, West Bank and Gaza, Egypt did not allow UNRWA to operate on its territories.

The rise to power of Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1952 ushered in a golden age for Palestinians in Egypt. Palestinians were regarded as equal to Egyptian nationals and were able to access education and other state services and to work without restrictions. However, by the late 1970s the dispersed Palestinian communities in Egypt were increasingly affected by tensions between the Egyptian government and the Palestinian liberation organisation. The Camp David peace agreement and the assassination of Egypt’s culture minister by the Palestinian faction headed by Abu Nidal in 1978 proved a turning point. Laws and regulations were amended...