

Survival to livelihood strategies for Mozambican refugees in South Africa

by Frederick Golooba-Mutebi and Stephen M Tollman

Many Mozambican refugees in South Africa have managed to move on from initial short-term survival strategies to achieve long-term livelihoods.

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.¹

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 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



Thando Mokoena

Author with two Mozambican traditional healers

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

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.

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 and the Mozambicans in Tiko are no exception. Goods and services are regularly exchanged. Those lacking food and other essentials ask from neighbours, as do those lacking money. Women generally help each other with childminding.

“When I don’t have food, I go there [to a neighbour] and ask for a bucket of maize meal. I can also go there [to another neighbour] and ask, and cook for my children. We help each other.”

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.