

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This monograph reviews existing literature on two episodes of forced migration to South Africa. The first is the flight and reception of between 250,000 and 350,000 Mozambicans during that country's civil war in the 1980s. The second is an influx of people to South Africa from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) beginning in the early 1990s and continuing to this day.

The reception of the Mozambican refugees of the mid-1980s was shaped by a subtle and variegated cocktail of national apartheid politics and local interests and sensibilities. On the one hand, the apartheid government did not offer Mozambicans forced to leave their country by war refugee status. Until the mid-1990s, their presence in South Africa was *de jure* illegal. Yet, in a somewhat complicated gesture of ethnic solidarity, the Shangaan-speaking homeland administration of Gazankulu accepted all Mozambican refugees in its territory and provided them with land and assistance. The refugees thus occupied an ambivalent legal space. Within the borders of severely poverty-stricken homeland territory their presence was *de facto* legal. Yet the moment they crossed the border into South Africa proper, they risked arrest and deportation. In this twilight existence, many joined the very lowest ranks of the (illegal) labour market, working for commercial farmers in the northeastern lowveld, for their Shangaan-speaking neighbours as field labourers and domestic workers, and in the industrial economy of the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging region.

From 1995, the Mozambican refugee population slowly and incrementally began to gain formal legal status. By mid-2000 the majority had permanent residence status, and by the end of 2004, permanent residents had won the right to receive social grants from the state.

Yet a disturbing gap remains between the refugees' status in law and their status in reality of social practice. It appears that state officials, from welfare department agents to law enforcement officers, refuse to recognise their South African identity documents; that refugees occupy much the same place in the labour market they did when they were undocumented; that local government refuses to furnish their villages with infrastructure.

The existing literature is curiously quiet on this disturbing gap between the *de jure* and *de facto* status of former refugees. One possible explanation for this state of affairs, which requires further research, is that local and regional economies became structurally dependent on the labour of undocumented refugees, and thus resisted their legal integration.

Forced migration to South Africa from the DRC appears to be a predominantly young, urban, male and middle-class phenomenon. Nearly one in two forced migrants from the DRC have some tertiary education and fewer than one in 20 was unemployed in the DRC. They are thus a world apart from their Mozambican counterparts, and their motivations and aspirations are very different too. While many no doubt fled in the face of persecution, and others in the face of violent instability, still others left because the DRC is increasingly unable to sustain a middle-class existence.

If the motives of many were indeed to retrieve a middle-class existence, the majority have failed categorically to do so. While 4% of Congolese migrants were unemployed in the DRC, 29% are unemployed in South Africa. A further 50% are in work they describe as unskilled – street vending, cutting hair, washing and guarding cars – while just four 4% are in what they regard as skilled work. If the majority occupied the upper echelons of the Congolese labour market and education system, their situation in South Africa is pretty much reversed. The mean monthly income of Congolese refugees in South Africa is R618 per month; their median monthly income R500 per month.

All qualitative research on Congolese refugees in South Africa has found levels of integration to be frail and insubstantial. Congolese refugees generally cluster in tight-knit, defensive ethnic networks, their relations with other Congolese hostile and suspicious, their relations with South Africans thin and cautious. They thus occupy a social territory characterised by low trust and limited reciprocity, a state of affairs which renders their capacity to be absorbed into the labour market very slight indeed.

Several dozen ethnically constituted associations of Congolese refugees exist in South Africa. Their functions are primarily to assist new arrivals with survivalist strategies and to shore up and preserve their members' cultural and ethnic identities, particularly those of children born on South African soil.

While research has shown that some African immigrants to South African have become reasonably successful cross-border traders, Congolese refugees are not well represented among them. Most are survivalists working in the margins of the informal economy. For reasons the literature has not explored, Congolese predominate in the ranks of South Africa's car guards and street-side haircutters.