DEMOGRAPHY, URBANISATION AND MOBILITY

Southern Africa: Between the “South African Land of Opportunity” and Survival

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Fotografia: "Moving Shadows", Girma Berta

Many of the region’s unstable countries see South Africa, the country that dominates the south of the continent due to its size and economic importance, as a panacea. The socioeconomic reality of neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, where future prospects are bleak, as well as the people of Lesotho —literally engulfed by the influential South Africa—; of countries where conflict and violence have forced many into exile, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), or Rwanda and Burundi before it; and of countries poised to see mass migration due to famine and climate change, such as Madagascar, has turned this southern African country into the only viable option.

In South Africa, foreigners born in African countries are referred to as “foreign nationals”, a way of denoting that they are more closely related than those born outside the continent. A way of saying that they are, at least in theory, “brothers” and are joined by a special bond. Sharing the challenges and hardships of getting by in societies with similar

socioeconomic problems, as well as values and traditions in which hospitality plays a central role, means that African foreigners will never be viewed with the iciness and indifference reserved for foreigners with no links to Africa.

Nonetheless, the reality is that, in its almost thirty years as a democratic nation, xenophobia in South Africa has steadily grown. According to official figures, about 7 percent of the 60 million people who live in South Africa (4.2 million) are immigrants or asylum seekers. The racial segregation imposed for decades by apartheid is now in the past, but that has not stopped structural racism from rearing its head, which begs the question: why has its recent history failed to result in greater integration? Access to employment, education, housing and healthcare, fundamental rights set out in both the international treaties signed by South Africa and its progressive Constitution (1996), have not prevented the occurrence of cyclical and recurring episodes of violence against foreigners from neighbouring countries, nor the persecution of those who, after fleeing authoritarian regimes, natural disasters or in their desire for a better future, have run up against administrative hurdles in their attempts to regularise their status.

96 percent of the people who apply to the Department of Home Affairs for the status required to reside in "the country of opportunities" –stable and with a higher level of development than the average country on the continent– are initially rejected, forcing them to appeal and extend an unlawful situation that entails a huge psychological burden and often lasts years. And only one out of every 20 people ultimately gain legal status. There are even some nationalities, such as the DRC, whose citizens, according to the National Council of Congolese for Development (an organisation based in Pretoria that was set up by young people and working class Congolese migrants in South Africa to find economic, cultural and political solutions to the situation facing the DRC) have failed to receive even one single ruling granting residency in the past five years.

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In the same way as there are common African values and certain shared traditions, migrants looking to adapt to a country such as South Africa, despite its eleven official languages, often encounter language barriers that exacerbate the confrontation. In fact, the past decade has seen frequent xenophobic incidents, organised through calls posted on social media that incite to hatred and urge the population to "put South Africa first", employing formulas seen in other parts of the world. In 2008, clashes in Johannesburg left 60 people dead; in 2015, migrant-owned businesses were the target of organised assaults; and in 2019, a further 22 people lost their lives in altercations against foreigners. In summer 2021, during the riotous looting that followed the initial demonstrations against the imprisonment of former president Jacob Zuma, in which 337 people were killed,

migrants kept their businesses closed for several weeks to keep from losing their source of livelihood and avoid exposure to a violent situation that, despite having nothing to do with them initially, they knew could affect them indirectly, with violent groups capitalising on the chaos and insecurity of the moment to intimidate and remind them that they are not welcome.

Getting by

> «I came to South Africa to get away from the insecurity in my country, Burundi. My husband had been killed. He was a soldier who worked as a bodyguard for a politician who had been murdered. Then, they came for the families. I was told to run away. A friend of my husband gave me money to flee. I didn't know where to go. My children were away at boarding school. I was terribly confused. A truck driver agreed to take me to Tanzania, but sexually assaulted me on the way and said I had to pay for passage. Then he told the other drivers to give me a ride, that they could abuse me too. That's how I reached Mozambique. In Maputo, a man who had been a friend of my husband helped me get to Durban. At first I lived in the street, in the rain, until someone told me about a building with rooms to rent for people like me.»
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> Mama Consola (from Burundi, living in Durban). Interview conducted by the author in May 2021 in Durban (South Africa).

The economic migrants who work hard to build a future in South Africa come from Zimbabwe (24 percent), Mozambique (12 percent), Lesotho (7 percent) and Malawi (3 percent), while asylum seekers are generally from Ethiopia (25 percent), DRC (23 percent), Somalia (11 percent), Burundi (4 percent) and Eritrea [1]. Internal conflicts and the proliferation of radical groups have turned South Africa into a place where people believe that it is possible to make a living. This sentiment was shared by many of the migrants who arrived more than 25 years ago, fleeing Rwanda or, most recently, Ethiopia.

In South Africa, the Constitution and the Refugees Act, as well as other laws which regulate specific needs, state that all people are entitled to the basic means for survival. However, a draft bill published in 2019 considers curtailing the right to medical care of undocumented migrants, except in the case of pregnant women and children under the age of six. Another problem that has steadily grown is the number of minors whose births, and therefore existence, have not been registered, because to do so, both parents must provide proof of legal residence in South Africa. According to official sources, at least 100,000 children are

currently in this situation.

The regularisation process is so long and demoralising that many do not even consider attempting it, and they prolong their irregular situation for years due to their lack of a valid visa. If they meet UNHCR's requirements, they may apply for refugee status, in which case they are handed an asylum application document that is valid for 6 months, after which they are required to either wait for a final decision or renew their permit. This formality must be always completed in the place where the original application was filed, even if the person moves around the country and lives thousands of kilometres away. If they fail to renew their documentation on time, they are forced to pay a fine of one thousand rands (about €60). People without valid documents in South Africa have very little room for manoeuvre when it comes to day-to-day activities such as, for instance, opening bank accounts or purchasing a home or car, as a result of their "illegal" status.

> Internal conflicts and the proliferation of radical groups have turned South Africa into a place where people believe that it is possible to make a living

> «When I came to South Africa, I went to the UNHCR office, filled in a form and they gave me a number. But that was the end of it. I was told that I had to wait for my refugee status to be approved. I don't know if this is going to help me.»
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> Mama Jane (from Burundi, living in Durban). Interview conducted by the author in May 2021 in Durban (South Africa).

Madagascar: Future climate migrants?

The history of migration between Madagascar and South Africa dates back almost five centuries, to the time when Dutch colonists began importing people as slaves from Madagascar and Indonesia to Cape Town. During the years of struggle against the apartheid regime, the Madagascan Government, just as other governments in the region did, welcomed members of South African liberation movements and allowed the creation of *Radio Freedom* to rally public support and provide information about the events in South Africa. In the 21st century, multiple internal political crises have been mediated, while the groundwork for commercial trade was set. This geographical and political proximity suggests that the critical situation facing the population of Southern Madagascar, where the economic effects of COVID-19, which has decimated the tourism sector, have been compounded by severe drought, is poised to increase the flow of migrants among those who can afford the journey.

The warning of a potential famine in Southern Madagascar was issued in August 2021. “I clean the insects as best I can but there’s almost no water”, declared a mother of four to the BBC. “My children and I have been eating this every day now for eight months because we have nothing else to eat and no rain to allow us to harvest what we have sown.”

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), 1.1 million people (with some sources putting this figure as high as 1.3 million, out of a total population of 25.6 million inhabitants) are in a food emergency situation and require nutritional assistance, with half a million people at risk of starvation. Fandiova (in the Amboasary-Atsimo district) is the epicentre of this grave situation triggered by the worst drought in the past 40 years, which has prevented the population from harvesting crops during the past two seasons. According to the UN, 30,000 people have reached the highest level of food insecurity (out of five), with Madagascar becoming the first country in the world to experience a famine caused by climate change, not war or conflict.

The world’s fourth largest island, with a per capita GDP of 442 dollars and where half of all children under the age of five (the tenth highest rate in the world) are chronically malnourished, is among the countries most vulnerable to natural disasters, and is heavily exposed to cyclones. It is also feeling the effects of mass deforestation, having lost 90% of its original forest cover due to logging for charcoal production. This data supports the UN’s thesis that the famine which is threatening the population of Southern Madagascar is the result of a climate emergency for which they have virtually no responsibility (having contributed less than 0.01 percent of the carbon dioxide emissions, according to the Global Carbon Project). “This is unprecedented. These people have done nothing to contribute to climate change. They don’t burn fossil fuels… and yet they are bearing the brunt of climate change”, explained the UN World Food Programme’s Shelley Thakral, after noting the land’s increase in aridity in recent years. A sentiment the Madagascan president, Andry Rajoelina, quickly seconded, in declaring that: “My countrymen are paying the price for a climate crisis that they did not create.”

However, in early December 2021, a study conducted by scientists from the World Weather Attribution (WWA) refuted the UN’s argument, claiming that the food crisis in Madagascar is the result of poverty, poor infrastructure and a dependency on rain-fed agriculture, coupled with the climate’s natural variability. It highlighted “the vulnerability in the region and need to improve the living conditions of the population.” The study also suggests that “based on observations and climate modelling, the occurrence of poor rains as observed from July 2019 to June 2021 in Southern Madagascar has not significantly increased due to human-caused climate change,” and cites the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which, in August 2021, noted that “global warming is not expected to affect levels of drought in Madagascar until it reaches two degrees Celsius (at present the increase stands at 1.1 degrees C).”

> Accordint to FAO, 1.1 million people are in a food emergency situation in Madagascar

However, while the debate surrounding the reason why 90% of the population of Southern Madagascar have been affected to varying extents by the food crisis continues, the population survives only on the very locusts that once threatened their crops, raw berries and wild leaves.

COVID-19 forces migrants to return to Lesotho

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM), together with Lesotho's Ministry of Home Affairs, has calculated that about 20,000 people have returned from South Africa in the past year due to joblessness caused by COVID-19 restrictions. In 2021, the IOM organised vocational training programmes and workshops to stimulate the creation of cooperatives that could serve as an outlet for both young returnees and those whose migration plans had been thwarted by rising unemployment in South Africa (34.9 percent in November 2021), largely the result of the pandemic.

Located 30 kilometres from Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, the IOM rents classrooms in which, for five intense weeks, participants learn to create objects from recycled materials or make beauty and hygiene products: "Money may be spent today, but will run out tomorrow. Skills and trades, on the other hand, do not disappear. They stay with you forever. Vocational training is transformational. It helps vulnerable youth feel more secure and empowers them to bring about positive change in their communities," explains Eriko Nishimura, head of IOM Lesotho, as she supervises the fruits of a new graduating class a few days before graduation.

About 30 percent of the population have been administered a full dose of the vaccine in Lesotho, and awareness is growing as a result of a geographical location, surrounded by South Africa, that places them at greater risk of transmission. The working and social relationship was hammered out before the end of apartheid, when 60 percent of the adult Basotho population aged 20 to 44 were employed in the mines of South Africa and 70 percent of all households in Lesotho had at least one person who had emigrated. The individual remittances sent to families and their economic impact accounted for close to half of the small Southern African country's GDP.

New status for Zimbabweans

South Africa is the country that receives the highest number of immigrants on the African continent, in addition to an incalculable number of undocumented migrants from neighbouring countries. Close to 70 percent emigrate from the 16 countries that comprise the Southern African Development Community (SADC), while 24 percent come from Zimbabwe, the country with the most nationals in South Africa, according to data from the OCHA Relief Web.

In 2001, there were an estimated 3 million Zimbabweans, most of whom lived in the Guateng province (which includes Pretoria and Johannesburg), while, between 2007 and 2008, an average of 3,000 Zimbabweans a day entered the country with tourist visas to

work in the mines in Limpopo. A situation that continued for years and which took a radical turn in 2021, when the Department of Home Affairs announced that, as of 1 January 2022, all Zimbabweans would have to regularise their status and obtain a work permit in order to remain in the country. So marked the end of the Zimbabwe Exemption Permit, which is estimated to affect roughly 200,000 people. “We have given a 12-month grace period to apply for a permit through the normal immigration laws,” explained Aaron Motsoaledi, the current minister of Home Affairs, after confirming that all Zimbabweans who can prove that they have been in the country for more than a decade, having entered as the 2009 agreement was being adopted, are eligible for regularisation. The economic opportunities that South Africa has historically offered are experiencing a worrying decline, a situation made worse by the political pressure surrounding the high rate of unemployment (which affects 70 percent of all young people). These are the reasons for the Government’s about-face in bilateral relations.

“The plan may result in Zimbabwean permit-holders’ lives being disrupted, with children denied the opportunity to register for school, employers refusing to renew work contracts and banks denying services or withholding access to accounts,” declared Sharon Ekambaram, head of the Refugee and Migrant Rights Programme at Lawyers for Human Rights in Johannesburg, in a letter signed by 46 organisations. The IOM estimates that there are two million people currently living in South Africa without legal residence permits, although some NGOs believe this figure to be far higher. South Africa is looking to retain all “productive” Zimbabweans who are working, studying or who are self-employed. It is urging people in this situation to apply for a four-year residence permit, otherwise deportations will begin in 2022. As they waited in interminable lines to present their paperwork this December, Zimbabweans complained of being treated “like animals” and of administrative bureaucracy characterised by corruption, confusion and overcrowding.

> The Zimbabwe Exemption Permit was cancelled in 2022, forcing 200.000 Zimbabweans to regularise their status and obtain a work permit in order to remain in South Africa

The sense of frustration steadily mounted as the 31 December cut-off date drew nearer and people realised that the Home Affairs decision would not be reversed. “This new documentation process is just a way of forcing us all to go back home. I don’t think they will serve us all by the end of the year,” stated a residence permit applicant after describing the sense of general unrest. “The demand for documentation presents Zimbabweans working here with big problems. The authorities want them to ask their employers for a letter saying how many years they have been working for them. Then the boss refuses to give the letter, because they think it’s a trick by the Government to penalise them for employing illegal Zimbabweans,” explains Gabriel Shumba, lawyer and head of the Zimbabwe Exiles’ Forum.

Life in South Africa

Nothing is easy in South Africa, and life for “foreign nationals”, now a rather confusing denomination, has grown increasingly more complicated in what is an immature democracy when it comes to applying the rights that its Constitution has recognised for almost three decades. To a certain extent, when you talk to people from troubled African countries, they believe it is South Africa’s duty to accept them and give them an opportunity because of the debt they owe them. They remind you that their countries of origin safeguarded those who fought against apartheid and took a stand so that South Africa today may be a free and democratic country. And those are the very values that foreign nationals are seeking when they decide to look for a better life with a one-way ticket to South Africa.

REFERENCIAS

1 — UNDESA (2020) *International Migrant Stock* [Disponible en línea].



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Carla Fibla García-Sala és periodista, escriptora i analista especialitzada en l'Àfrica i el Pròxim Orient. Ha viscut i viatjat pel Magrib i el Pròxim Orient durant més de 15 anys, obrint dues corresponsalies per a la Cadena SER i La Vanguardia. Llicenciada en Periodisme i especialitzada en informació internacional i països del sud, als 22 anys es va instal·lar a El Caire (Egipte), on va començar la seva carrera professional treballant com a *freelance* per a diversos mitjans. Va treballar per al Diario 16 (Madrid) i Euronews (Lió, França), i ha col·laborat en el llançament de diversos projectes periodístics online com El Estado Mental o Contexto, a més d'assessorar algunes ONG com Acció Contra la Fam, Fundació Vicenç Ferrer o Amnistia Internacional. També ha assessorat institucions centrades en la cooperació per al desenvolupament com AECID o FIAAP. Ha publicat sis llibres d'assaig i entrevistes sobre migracions, drets humans, democràcia i governança, les temàtiques en les quals s'ha especialitzat. El 2021 va treballar com a corresponsal de la revista Mundo Negro i del diari El País des de Sud-àfrica, cobrint l'àrea de l'Àfrica austral.