“Lesotho: Will the Enclave Empty?”

Jim Cobbe
Department of Economics
Florida State University
Tallahassee FL 32306-2180
jcobbe@mailer.fsu.edu

[Published on the web in Migration Information Source Country Profiles,
http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?id=248]

September 2004

South Africa completely surrounds Lesotho, an enclave whose total population is estimated to be around 2.5 million. There is a long history of close interaction between the two countries. A survey taken in Lesotho in 2003 found that 37 percent of the people interviewed reported a family member working in South Africa, 26 percent reported a family member permanently settled there, 21 percent had sought medical care there, and 18 percent admitted to possessing South African identification documents. Further, the people of Lesotho are almost wholly Basotho, but the numbers of ethnic Basotho in South Africa are even higher.

Not long ago, Lesotho had the distinction of having a higher proportion of its labor force temporarily employed outside its borders than any other country. For most of the 20th century, as much as half the adult male population worked on a temporary basis in South Africa, predominantly in the gold mines, but also in most other economic sectors. Until the tightening of border controls in mid-century, many Basotho also migrated permanently, albeit technically illegally, to South Africa. With the heightened opposition to South Africa's apartheid regime, and then the coming of majority rule in South Africa, Lesotho's migration patterns have changed substantially.

Lesotho's migration has witnessed six main changes over the last 40 years or so:

• First, as opposition to apartheid expanded, growing numbers of political refugees from South Africa entered Lesotho. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, these refugees formed a distinct exile community, especially in the capital city of Maseru. After South African military attacks on exile housing, the number of such exiles dwindled, and political refugees moved to safer locales further north or outside of Africa altogether. After 1994, almost all these exiles left Lesotho.

• Second, the numbers of workers from Lesotho in the mines of South Africa first increased substantially, as real wages rose in the 1970s and 1980s and Lesotho became a preferred labor source. The numbers have since declined, dramatically in recent years, initially as a result of mechanization and relative stagnation in gold mining, and later partly because of a preference for South African labor.

• Third, there has been a constant and debilitating brain drain from Lesotho to South Africa, and before that, to some extent, to Botswana and other African countries. This movement encompasses skilled workers, especially those in professional and technical fields.

• Fourth, some former migrant workers became legal permanent residents of South Africa in the late 1990s, following changes in South African law.

• Fifth, with continued relative economic stagnation and political upheavals in Lesotho, and the drying up of migration opportunities for the unskilled, growing numbers of clandestine migrants have attempted to find work in South Africa, especially in the less regulated parts of its economy such as farming and domestic service.

• Sixth, a new group of economic migrants has come to Lesotho, the ethnic Chinese from East Asia, who now constitute the largest group of foreign residents ever to live in the country.

Problems With Numbers

Lesotho was one of the largest sources of Black labor in South African mining for well over a century. In the heyday of South African reliance on Basotho labor in the gold mines, to work in the mines for at least a year or two was a normal part of becoming an adult. From the late 1940s through the early 1970s, normally any able-bodied male could obtain a contract as a novice to work on the mines. However, at that time, mine wages for Blacks were low, no higher in real terms in 1969 than before World War I, and not sufficient to maintain a family in Lesotho. So most migrants worked a few contracts to save enough money to pay bride price, and then "retired" to farming in Lesotho.

Until very recently, Black miners were always regarded by both employers and the state in South Africa as temporary, oscillating, migrants. This, together with the restrictions on entry into South Africa from Lesotho (which were essentially non-existent until mid-century, but then became progressively tighter) means that all data on migration from Lesotho to South Africa are highly suspect. It is common to try to distinguish between two kinds of migrants, temporary and permanent. But the institutional arrangements in Southern Africa result in two complications: many migrants have strong motivations to hide their origin and/or intent, and many more may be regarded, because of the institutional arrangements, as being in one category when their actual intent and behavior is consistent with the other.

Part of the problem is that there are at least as many ethnic Basotho who are South African citizens as there are Lesotho citizens, and there is a long history of cross-border movement in both directions. Thus, ambiguity about legal residence is not unusual. The survey response cited above - 18 percent of interviewees in Lesotho admitting to having South African identification documents - highlights the extent of such ambiguity.

Two examples may help to make this point. Until recently, all miners were legally temporary migrants. But after the mid-1980s, when recruitment of new novices to the mines essentially ceased and total mine employment started falling, in practice miners from Lesotho had to behave as permanent migrants whether they intended to return home eventually or not. The reason was that if, following a period of home leave at the end of a contract, they did not return to their mine on or before their recall date, they would lose their job and never get it back. Further, those who had lived in South Africa for five years were permitted to vote in the 1994 election, and since then, those with long residence have been permitted to have their families join them and seek permanent residence in South Africa. At the same time, after 1994, significant numbers of professional Basotho obtained employment in South Africa, including in government service. The latter normally had to either claim South African citizenship on some basis, or have some other basis for legal residence (such as a spouse with legal residence). Many of these professionals and other high-skilled Basotho migrants privately express every intention of returning to Lesotho eventually, but in order to retain their employment in South Africa they have to categorize themselves as permanent migrants.

In all cases where there are clandestine flows, there are problems with measuring migration. However, in the Southern African context there are these added problems of genuine ambiguity of status, as well as frequent reasons to doubt that official classification as temporary or permanent corresponds to the individual's true intent. Thus, although many sources give precise numbers for different categories of migrants, except where the number is for a category with a clear definition (e.g., numbers of miners officially recruited), all such numbers should be treated with considerable caution.

Migrant Labor and South African Mining

South African sources suggest that total employment in mining peaked in 1987, at about 673,000. The total number of foreign African mineworkers had probably peaked 14 years earlier, at about 340,000 (65.2 percent of the then total) in 1973. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, Lesotho was a preferred source of mineworkers, and the number of miners from Lesotho in South Africa (using Lesotho sources) probably peaked in 1990 at over 127,000. This was then well over half of the total foreign mine labor force of about 224,000. At that time, these miners outnumbered the ranks of people with formal wage-earning jobs in Lesotho, a situation that persisted until the late 1990s. Since 1990, the numbers of miners overall, and from Lesotho in particular, have fallen fairly rapidly. By 2002, total employment in South African mines was down to about 480,000. Now that the mines prefer South African workers, who can more easily be "stabilized," (shifted from contract to continuing employment, and out of hostels for migrants) these workers from Lesotho have been retrenched. By 2003, the number from Lesotho in the mines was estimated to be fewer than 60,000.

The consequences of the end of new legal migration to South African mines, and the retrenchment of migrants, have been devastating for Lesotho. They have been exacerbated by population growth, political instability, drought, continuing soil erosion, and the peculiarities of the country's limited economic development. The country, with an overall HIV-positive rate believed to be among the highest in the world, has the distinction of being the only place in Southern Africa in which more men than women are HIV positive. This is a result of the relative affluence of former miners when they had jobs, lived in single-sex hostels at the mines, and often had access to sex workers. Meanwhile, agricultural output has fallen by about 40 percent in the last 20 years, and few returned migrants have access to good agricultural land.

In recent years, Lesotho has qualified under the United States' African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), under which African countries that meet certain US criteria qualify for preferential access to the US market for certain goods, notably apparel. This has helped spur a rapid expansion of Lesotho's textile and garment industry. This industry was originally established to evade sanctions against South African exports during the apartheid era. The expansion has created tens of thousands of jobs, but almost exclusively employment for women; the garment factories do not employ men as shop-floor production workers. Rural poverty in Lesotho has re-emerged with a vengeance after the brief period of prosperity in the 1970s and 1980s that accompanied the rapid increase in the real wages of mineworkers in South Africa. It is now accompanied by recurrent hunger, as increasing proportions of rural residents are no longer able to grow food because of rising landlessness and inability to access working capital when remittances are no longer received.

Brain Drain

There is a long history of educated Black Africans moving back and forth between Lesotho and South Africa. During the apartheid era, many Black (and some White) South Africans chose employment in Lesotho over discrimination in South Africa. They made important contributions to health care,

education, and government and the professions in Lesotho. In the opposite direction, a number of individuals born in Lesotho rose to prominence in South Africa, perhaps the best-known being Potlako Leballo, who became leader of the Pan African Congress of South Africa. In the 1970s and 1980s, expatriates from the rest of Anglophone Africa joined the South African exiles in Lesotho. But already in the late 1970s, there were also movements from Lesotho to South Africa, initially to the Bantustans (the nominally independent Black homelands set up on an ethnic basis under apartheid) and then in the 1990s to public and private employers throughout the South African economy. There are no reliable estimates of the numbers of people involved, but as a proportion of the stock of educated workers in Lesotho, and especially of the more talented ones, the movement is very significant. For example, it is known that over 100 medical doctors from Lesotho are now working in South Africa or further north, as a result of which the Lesotho government has had to recruit more than 50 foreign doctors.

This brain drain is driven by the substantially higher remuneration available in South Africa, the better prospects for advancement, and the far better social and infrastructural environment. National income per person in South Africa is almost four times higher than in Lesotho, even by purchasing power parity estimates, and the actual monetary differential is even larger. As early as the 1970s, when mine wages started their upward movement, there were widespread stories of male teachers leaving schools in Lesotho to take jobs (usually on the surface) in South African mines, and numerous cases of university academics and government professionals leaving Lesotho for equivalent posts at two to three times the salary or more in Bantustans.

Since 1994 or a little earlier, the floodgates have opened. This has taken place in part because of changes in South African law, but the situation has also been affected by changes in the social and political environment in South Africa that make foreign Blacks far more willing (as well as able) to live there. Many of Lesotho's skilled workers have found employment, one way or another, in South Africa. There remains a large salary differential between Lesotho and South Africa, resulting in Lesotho's continuing shortages of doctors, nurses, accountants, engineers, many kinds of skilled manual workers, and other professionals. Basotho with strong qualifications continue to seek better opportunities across the border, or in the case of medical personnel, even farther afield. In fact, Basotho nurses have been recruited to work in both the US and the UK.

Illegal Migrants

Until the 1950s, Black Africans from Lesotho (then Basutoland) were treated within South Africa just like South African Blacks. This was the case because in 1911, when the Union of South Africa was established, provision was made for the future incorporation of the three then "High Commission Territories," now Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland, subject to the consent of their populations. As a result, the South African government tended to treat them similarly to its own "native reserves," and the British government tended to neglect their governance and development. It was not until some point in the 1950s that it finally became clear that Basutoland and the two other former High Commission Territories would not be incorporated into South Africa, and South Africa began imposing and progressively tightening border controls. However, the border is of the kind that can never be sealed. In the Western lowlands, it is a river that for much of the year can be walked through; much of the rest of it is in mountainous territory that would be impractical to fence effectively. So crossing the border and evading controls has always been possible. Furthermore, crossing at official control points is often possible without documents permitting residence or employment - Basotho have always visited South Africa to shop, seek medical treatment, or make social visits, and South Africans go in the other direction for similar reasons. Once in South Africa, a person from Lesotho can seek employment or self-employment in the large informal sector with relatively little fear of detection, and not much risk

of deportation if detected. And even if someone from Lesotho is deported, it is easy to return to South Africa.

As a result, there is a long history of undocumented and unrecorded migration for economic and social reasons to South Africa from Lesotho, and there is no real way to know the numbers involved. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in both the Free State and Gauteng provinces of South Africa, which have large ethnic Basotho populations of South African citizens, migrants from Lesotho are found throughout the economy, and include some prominent and successful entrepreneurs. In addition, many others have marginal occupations such as domestic service, hawking goods, and running various illegal activities. Although both sides have rejected politically unifying Lesotho with South Africa, it appears that in practice both governments have decided there is no point in trying to prevent these movements of people.

In May 2004, the Lesotho minister of home affairs and public safety said that the two governments had completed a bilateral agreement on free movement, under which travelers will only have to show passports at the border. Further, there will be no requirement for a pass or passport stamp. Given the large income differentials between the two countries, and Lesotho's substantial disadvantages as a location for economic activity within Southern Africa, it is a safe prediction that over the coming decades a substantial portion of Lesotho's population will move to South Africa, at least for much of their working lives.

Chinese Immigrants

Historically, Lesotho has received very few foreign immigrants from outside Africa. Since the late 19th century, there have been a few families of South Asian descent in Lesotho as a result of migration from the South African province of Natal. Other non-indigenous groups have been confined to a few families of European ancestry who originally came as missionaries, traders, or colonial officials, and who chose to stay.

The growing Chinese community appears to run counter to the past trend of extremely limited immigration from outside Africa. A few Chinese entered Lesotho soon after independence in 1966, when Lesotho recognized the government in Taiwan rather than the one in Beijing. A few private investments were made, and there was some aid from the Taiwanese government. However, the last 15 years have seen a substantial change. Although Lesotho now recognizes Beijing, a local boom in textile and apparel manufacturing has been financed almost wholly by investors from Taiwan. These investors have brought in skilled workers and managers from mainland China. In one example, the large Nien Hsing Denim Mill is reported to have around 500 Chinese staff in addition to its 3,000 Basotho employees. In recent years, Chinese migrants have also moved into retail trade throughout the country, so that even in remote rural districts, many shops are run by Chinese. Chinese migrants have also established themselves in construction, with the result that Chinese firms are winning contracts for a majority of new buildings. Beijing's embassy in Lesotho now estimates that there are close to 5,000 Chinese nationals in Lesotho from both Taiwan and the mainland, which makes it the largest foreign community ever to reside there.

Challenges Ahead

Before 1994, Lesotho's great advantage was that although it was inside South Africa, it was not part of that country. As such, its citizens benefited from employment opportunities and remittances, without directly facing the repression of the apartheid regime. Perhaps as important, the country received much

international aid and support, political and otherwise, as one of South Africa's "hostages;" benefited from tourism by South Africans wanting to escape apartheid's Puritanism; and received "sanctions-busting" investment. Since 1994, from political, economic, and social points of view, that characteristic has become Lesotho's huge disadvantage. Because of Lesotho's lack of both natural and man-made resources, and its many disadvantages as a location for economic activity within the Southern African regional economy, in the context of relatively free movement of persons Lesotho will face severe problems maintaining public services. In order to do so, it will have to tolerate extreme inequality, substantial depopulation, or both. This is because to retain the services of the skilled, employers (including the public sector) will need to pay salaries to some extent commensurate with those available in South Africa. However, gainful activity for the unskilled can only generate substantially lower incomes than for comparable work in South Africa because of the other disadvantages of Lesotho's location.

It is difficult to envisage a set of policies that could change Lesotho's status from what it now is: a relatively impoverished peripheral appendage to South Africa from which the more talented, skilled, industrious, or desperate will increasingly migrate to more prosperous places in South Africa. Lesotho's best hope is probably relatively rapid depopulation, until it eventually becomes South Africa's equivalent of the Scottish Highlands or Appalachia. Such areas, while not prosperous compared to the surrounding, larger economies, have still succeeded in greatly increasing average incomes. Unfortunately, Lesotho's political independence, and the vested interests that independence has created, probably make the chances of a smooth transition to such a relatively happy outcome less likely. Similarly, the efforts of foreign aid donors and international organizations to make conditions in Lesotho better may delay acceptance of the inevitable rather than easing the transition.

Sources:

Ambrose, David P., 1994 - 2004. *Summary of Events in Lesotho,* (quarterly), Roma, Lesotho: National University of Lesotho.

Crush, Jonathan, and James, Wilmot (eds), 1995. *Crossing Boundaries: Mine Migrancy in a Democratic South Africa*, Cape Town: IDASA.

Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Southern African Regional Poverty Network.

McDonald, David, and Jonathan Crush, (eds), 2002. *Destinations Unknown: Perspectives on the Brain Drain in Southern Africa*, Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa.

Simelane, Sandile E., 1999. *Trend in International Migration: Migration among Professionals, Semi-Professionals, and Miners in South Africa*, 1970 - 1997, Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

Wohlmuth, Karl, et al., (eds), 1997. *African Development Perspectives Yearbook 1996: Regional Perspectives on Labour and Employment*, Munster, Germany: Lit Verlag.