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# Migrant Labour, Subsistence Agriculture, and Rural Poverty in South Africa: An Empirical Study of Living Standards in Three Rural Areas of KwaZulu

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**Abstract:** This study of three black rural areas of South Africa shows that apartheid has institutionalized circulating rural-urban migration and significantly affected social and economic fabrics. The areas studied had a high male absentee rate and were poor. Incomes were unequally distributed, with the poorest 40 percent of households receiving only 12 percent of the total income and the top 10 percent receiving 34 percent of the total. Poverty was inversely related to household size, the number of migrants, education, and stockholdings. Although the majority of the households had agricultural land (1-2 ha), earnings from migration provided 73-77 percent of household earnings, and agricultural productivity levels were very low. The socioeconomic profiles were those of displaced urban communities rather than rural homesteads.

## Introduction

Uneven spatial economic development coupled with the controls over population movement that are part of the apartheid system has resulted in the institutionalization of a system of "circulating labour migration" (Natrass, 1981). Workers leave the rural areas to seek better opportunities in the towns but are prevented by law from taking their families with them. As this study of three rural areas in KwaZulu shows, this situation not only has a severe social impact on the lives of the people involved but also significantly affects the economies in those areas.

Circulating rural-urban migration has both positive and negative effects on the area supplying the migrants. On the positive side, these influences act through one or both of:

- *a direct increase in living standards resulting from remittances in cash or kind sent back by the migrants and from a reduction in pressure on existing resources through the absence of the migrant (providing that the migrants' marginal revenue products were less than their wages); and*
- *a secondary increase in rural living standards resulting from an increase in productivity due to the use of new techniques learned by the migrant and brought back to the home region (Miracle and Berry, 1970; and Waters, 1973) and from modernization of the supplying area due to the increased impact of products imported from outside as a result of the increased cash flow in the area and the experiences of the returning migrant (Caldwell, 1968; and Oberai and Singh, 1980).*

The negative impacts of migration results are more complicated and flow from the following:

- Continued out-migration generates a situation in which the supplying region finds itself short of labour at critical moments in the production process, which causes the supply of agricultural output to fall. Since the chances of migration are higher among the well-educated, intelligent young men (the very people one would expect to make a significant contribution to agricultural output in the home region), this shortage can represent a significant cost to the home region (Kuznets, 1966; and Miracle and Berry, 1970).
- Migration alters the generation and allocation of the agricultural surplus in the home region. Radical analysts argue that migration leads the home region to place too high a value on education that is more suited to the needs of the supplying region than those of the region in which it is provided. This orients the views of young people towards migration, thus perpetuating the process (Arrighi, 1967; and Amin, 1974).
- Migration to a new area may alter consumption patterns in the home region, as migrants are exposed to a different range of commodities in the region to which they go and from which they bring back their experiences on their return. If this change in domestic consumption patterns results in a decrease in investment, then this too will be a significant cost.
- Out-migration can militate against the adoption of new techniques. The absence of a significant number of men puts such pressure on the remaining workforce that it lacks the opportunity to adopt new ways of production (Gulliver, 1955; Arrighi, 1970; and Gluckman, 1958). Furthermore, if the migrants' experiences in the destination economy are unpleasant and upsetting, they will strengthen the migrants' ties to their traditional beliefs and militate against the adoption of new ideas in the supplying region (Watson, 1959).
- Migration also has social costs. In southern Africa, most of the areas supplying migrants have very few men, and this puts a substantial economic and social strain on the members of the community that remain in the rural areas. Women are a particularly stressed group. Studies have shown that women who are particularly at risk are those with greater responsibilities, those who have

inadequate resources, and those who have experienced longer exposure to the effects of their husbands' migration (Gordon, 1981; and May, 1985).

The overall impact of circulating migration on the rural supplying area will differ from case to case and depend on the specific circumstances in each area. This study includes surveys undertaken in three rural areas of KwaZulu—one of the “national states” or “bantustans” of South Africa, and attempts to assess the impact of migration on those areas. The system is now so widespread and entrenched that it has totally undermined the rural economy to the extent that the survival of the people in the supplying regions is now wholly dependent on the earnings and remittances of the migrants.

### Demography

Some 600 households were surveyed covering 5,905 individuals, of whom 52 percent were women, 50 percent were 18 years old or less, and 6 percent over 60. In all, 1066 people (20 percent) were away from home on the date of the survey, 73 percent of whom were male and 9 percent children attending school. Almost a quarter of the absentees had no formal education, and 45 percent had received insufficient education to ensure retention of literacy (less than 5 years). A further 35 percent had completed primary school, and 6 percent had a full school education.

### Destination and Occupation

Although South Africa's economy is dominated by the Witwatersrand, which produces approximately two thirds of the country's total manufacturing production, only 15 percent of the migrants from the study areas sought work there; the remaining 85 percent worked in the Natal/KwaZulu area itself and two thirds in the greater Durban area.

The migrants, with their low average educational levels, were largely confined to the lower skill jobs and, within this limitation, were spread unevenly over the various different economic sectors. Table 1 shows that the majority were employed in manufacturing or service sectors. Differences among the three areas reflect the proximity of the supplying region to the economic centre and the distribution of the recruiting systems for the mines (both the Natal coalfields and the gold mines of the Transvaal).

Significant differences were also observed in the degree of access to jobs both in spatial and sectoral terms by sex. From the spatial aspect, although legally one cannot make sex distinctions, in practice the population control aspects of apartheid are applied more strongly to women than to men. This, coupled with the natural limitations imposed by child rearing, accounts for the lower migration rates among women. Economically, sex discrimination is also evident. Unemployment rates among

**Table 1—Distribution of the Migrants by Economic Sector**

	Total sample	Mapumulo	Nqutu	Mbongolwane
<i>--- Percent of migrants in the sector ---</i>				
At school	9	13	8	7
Agriculture	2	1	2	4
Mining	6	1	9	8
Manufacturing	35	23	43	39
Self-employed	1	1	1	1
Service: domestic	12	12	11	12
Service: other	20	29	14	16
Other	3	5	2	3
Unemployed	12	15	10	10
<i>--- Number ---</i>				
Total sample size	1137	373	414	350

women migrants were consistently higher than among men, and those who were employed were concentrated in the low-wage domestic service sector.

### Migration, Income, and Income Distribution

Income levels revealed by the three surveys were low, and incomes were unevenly distributed. Mean household income, unadjusted for household size differences, was R37 per week,<sup>2</sup> and 50 percent of the households had weekly incomes of below R28. Wage earnings, including remittances from migrants, were by far the most important source of income, accounting for between 73-77 percent of total household income and, notwithstanding the so-called rural nature of the areas surveyed, agricultural incomes contributed less than 10 percent of the total. Indeed, less than one fifth of the households surveyed derived any income whatsoever from agriculture.

Incomes were unevenly distributed among households. The poorest 10 percent of the households surveyed received 1.5 percent of the total income in the three areas; the poorest 20 percent, 4 percent; and the poorest 40 percent, 12 percent. At the other end of the scale, the wealthiest 5 percent of the households surveyed received 21 percent of the income; the top 10 percent, 34 percent; and the top 20 percent, 52 percent. The Gini coefficient for the three areas as a whole was 0.474 (S.E. = 0.023), which is in line with the value calculated for African incomes in nonmetropolitan areas of South Africa by McGrath (1985).

Poverty was inversely related to household size, the number of migrant workers, the average education of the adult members of the household, and the extent of the animal stockholdings, and positively related to unemployment and dependency rates.

The communities surveyed, although nominally situated in rural areas (reflecting the apartheid system) are wholly dependent on the earnings and remittances of the circulating migrants who go to town. This dependence is largely recognized by the communities themselves as is shown by their perceptions of the migrants (Table 2).

Table 2—Communities' Perceptions of Migrants

	Percent
The community cannot survive without them	56.0
The migrants need money to maintain their farms	23.8
The migrants avoid farm work	6.8
The migrants would like to stay in the community	5.2
The migrants like to stay in the town	4.1
The migrants leave us with too much work	4.1

[Note:  $n = 541$ .]

### Migration and Agriculture and Rural Residence

Notwithstanding the very small earnings from agriculture, the majority of the households surveyed—85 percent in Mbongolwane, 91 percent in Mapumulo, and 33 percent in Nqutu—had access to fields. Plot sizes were small, varying from 1 to 7 ha. Productivity levels in these areas are low and were particularly poor at the time of the surveys due to widespread, persistent drought. With the exception of sugar, nearly all crop production was for subsistence.

Negative impacts on agriculture come, firstly, from the impact of migration on the available labour supply and, secondly, through the decision process. Despite the high absentee rates, 88 percent of the households stated that migrants still made important decisions relating to the rural household.

Waters' (1973) findings in relation to migration and investment in agriculture in central Africa were not valid here. Seventy-four percent of the households stated that they had no savings at all, 14 percent saved in order to pay for the education of their children, 9 percent for security, and only 3 percent for agricultural improvements.

The almost total alienation of the rural families from agriculture is most clearly demonstrated by their replies to a question relating to why migrants go to town (Table 3).

**Table 3—Perceptions of Why People Leave Rural Areas**

	First Choice	Second Choice
	--- Percent ---	
Families need money, and wages are better in towns	49	16
No work in rural areas	21	43
Cannot produce enough to survive	14	13
Not enough land	3	9
Need money but will return	4	15
Do not like rural areas	9	4

Respondents were also asked for their negative perceptions of rural life. More than half listed deprivation in the basic needs of food, water, and education. The difficulties of farming and the lack of social services such as medical care were also noted.

When asked why they did not settle permanently in towns, 29 percent said they wished to keep their land, and a further 15 percent said that they did not like urban life, but the majority—56 percent—listed reasons related to the controls limiting the urbanization of Africans. This is similar to the findings of Moller and Schlemmer (1981) and suggests that, given free access to the urban economy, some 50 percent of the African rural population would urbanize.

### Conclusion

Rural-urban circulating migration is a way of life in South Africa and has become institutionalized to the point where the rural homesteads can (to a large extent) be viewed as dislocated urban communities (Mayer, 1980). With present land/man ratios and male absentee rates, agriculture no longer offers means of survival, and (to most rural families) migration is a matter of necessity, not choice.

### Notes

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<sup>2</sup>Over the period of the survey, R0.84 = \$1.00.

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