

# The Lesotho/Free State Border

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ISS Paper 113 • October 2005

Price: R15.00

## INTRODUCTION

The subject of this paper is the 450km international border between the South African province of the Free State and the sovereign state of Lesotho. The aim is twofold: First, to examine the role of existing South African borderline control in shaping the relationships between those who live and those who work on the borderline. And secondly, to examine how South African labour market policy affects the participation of the Basotho in various South African labour markets.

It should be said at the outset that the border between Lesotho and the Free State, if not unique, is certainly unusual:

- Lesotho is entirely surrounded by South Africa. Indeed, it is the only member of the United Nations completely surrounded by another.
- Lesotho is ethnically and linguistically homogenous. Barring a recently settled minority of ethnic Chinese, the overwhelming majority of Lesotho's 2,2 million citizens are Sesotho speakers and regard themselves as Basotho. However, the boundaries of the Basotho *ethnos* are not coterminous with the borders of the Lesotho state.<sup>1</sup> The majority of South African citizens who live in the Free State province are also Sesotho speakers. They are bound to the people across the border by far more than a common linguistic and ethnic pedigree; most Basotho family networks cross the border between the Lesotho and the Free State. Lesotho and South Africa thus jointly co-host a Basotho *ethnos*.
- Ever since its establishment as a British protectorate more than a century and a half ago, Basotho nationals have participated overwhelmingly in the South African economy as wage labourers, traders, produce exporters and retail consumers. During the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, Lesotho citizens employed as migrant wage workers in

South Africa outnumbered wage employees in Lesotho by at least five to one.<sup>2</sup> Its gross national product has always comfortably outstripped its gross domestic product (GDP). Its citizens have always participated in the South African economy, and always will.

- Most of the towns on either side of the border owe both their origin and their current viability to commerce and trade across the border. Whilst relations between neighbours are neither smooth nor happy, the border's inhabitants are mutually dependent on one another. As the anthropologist David Coplan has put it, "the border is ... itself a place – a unity created around a division..."<sup>3</sup>
- Until 1963, there was no border control between Lesotho and South Africa. When it finally did emerge, the motivation was not to regulate the movement of goods or economically active people, but because of political animosity between the apartheid government and the new sovereign state of Lesotho.
- If recent survey results are to be believed, the presence of the border is illegitimate in the eyes of the overwhelming majority of Basotho citizens. Most believe either that Lesotho should be incorporated into South Africa, or that the Free State should be incorporated into Lesotho.<sup>4</sup>

The South African state has neither the capacity nor the moral authority to keep Lesotho's citizens out of South Africa

Against this backdrop, several commentators have argued that the South African state has neither the capacity nor the moral authority to keep Lesotho's citizens out of South Africa; that border controls between the two countries are bound to whittle away, whether *de jure* or merely in practice; that the *raison d'être* for Lesotho's sovereignty vanished at the end of apartheid, and that political incorporation into South Africa is inevitable – or at very least, highly desirable – in the long run.<sup>5</sup>

All of this may well prove to be correct, but not necessarily. For there remains a fairly diverse

range of players with vested interests in both the perpetuity of Lesotho's sovereign status, and in the continued policing of the border. Not least of these is Lesotho's aristocratic, military and bureaucratic strata, whose salaries are paid by the Lesotho state. Incorporating these strata into the South African polity and accommodating their interests would be neither simple nor inexpensive.

Secondly, South Africa suffers from high levels of chronic unemployment. The influx of foreign nationals from neighbouring states over the last decade is widely perceived as a severe Malthusian problem. In popular South African consciousness, jobs, houses and services are regarded as finite and critically scarce resources, which ought to be reserved for South Africans. (Later, we shall see that there is both truth and myth in this belief.) The South African state would thus wish to calculate which of its existing citizens would gain and which would lose, before agreeing to inherit another 2,2 million citizens. Not least, the South African government would want to know what the incorporation of a chronically underemployed population into South Africa would do to its welfare budget.

Finally, the South Africans who inhabit the border towns of the eastern Free State would by no means greet the opening of the border with unanimous approval. In 2002, the single South African National Defence Force (SANDF) company that patrols the Free State/Lesotho borderline was redeployed. The move was greeted by a tide of vociferous anger, led by the provincial agricultural union. The redeployment lasted precisely one fiscal year. In 2003, the SANDF company was back on the borderline, and plans were made to further increase personnel levels. Whilst South Africans who live on the borderline may be dependent on the contribution their cross-border neighbours make to the local economy, many also fear their Basotho neighbours, and feel strongly that the continued presence of armed and uniformed men along the river is a *sine qua non* for the perpetuation of their way of life.

In what follows, we examine the effects of border control in this eccentric, fluid and somewhat complicated environment. What is the effect of borderline control along a river which people cross at will to graze their cattle, to work and to visit family? How does the presence of borderline control shape life in a context where vast numbers of people cross the international boundary every day to shop, to fill up their cars, to visit the doctor, and to buy Lotto tickets? And what are the effects of labour market control policies when scores of Basotho cross the border to look for work? Note that there are several questions this paper does not ask. For

instance, we do not examine the border posts between the Free State and Lesotho, nor the regulation of commercial traffic. We limit ourselves to a discussion of the borderline and its effects on local relationships, and to aspects of the labour market.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first discusses the effects of the presence of the SANDF on the borderline. Secondly, we examine the participation of Basotho nationals in the South African labour market, particularly on the farms along the borderline. Finally, we look at the two major commercial border posts between Lesotho and the Free State – Ficksburg and Maseru Bridge.

### The Lesotho/Free State borderline

The patrolling of the 450km borderline between the Free State and Lesotho is currently in a transitional phase. The SANDF is handing over borderline control responsibility to the South African Police Service (SAPS), a process that is scheduled for completion in 2007. At time of writing, though, a single SANDF company, consisting of about 150 troops, is responsible for borderline control, with the assistance of about 85 members of a police unit.

The Free State/Lesotho borderline was first subject to South African military patrols in the early 1970s. Back then, the function of the military presence on the borderline was fairly clear. Lesotho had styled itself a frontline state. It gave refuge to exiled South Africans and supported the operational presence of the banned African National Congress (ANC) and its military wing. Border control was thus animated by the exigencies of counterinsurgency. Since the end of apartheid, though, the function of borderline control has become far less clear. Much of it is now about regulating relationships among the civilians who collectively comprise the Caledon Valley economy. And relationships among people in the Caledon Valley are anything but simple. As will become clear, it is probably reasonable to say that the SANDF is as involved in policing voluntary but illegal modes of accommodation between cross-border neighbours, as it is in protecting people from unwanted interlopers.

### A very potted history

It would not do to dwell too much on the history of the Caledon Valley, since people live in the present, and their interests change across the generations. Nonetheless, there are a few features of the borderline's history which go some way in explaining the complexities of the present, and we would do well to touch upon them.

The continued presence of armed and uniformed men along the river is a *sine qua non* for the perpetuation of their way of life

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Basotho commercial farmers had become serious players in supplying southern Africa's emerging mining towns with grain. Traditional extended family labour units had adapted well to European agricultural technology, and were sensitive to the opportunities presented by nascent industrialisation in southern Africa. Black farmers and white farmers were thus in direct competition. As happened in other parts of southern Africa during the same period, the colonial administration stepped in on behalf of white farmers and actively inhibited the development of black commercial agriculture through various forms of market interference.<sup>6</sup> As in other parts of South Africa, the destruction of independent black agriculture is vividly remembered in local oral history today, and informs Basotho attitudes to white farms here and now.<sup>7</sup>

There was an important, additional layer of complexity to the relationship between black farmers and white farmers. Many Basotho farmers, who had been dispossessed of their land and pushed across the Caledon River during the course of the mid and late 19th century, would perennially return to the white-owned Free State farms as sharecroppers. The early 20th century relationship between white farmers and black sharecroppers – which was not confined to the Caledon Valley, but occurred in pockets throughout southern Africa – was an inordinately ambivalent and difficult one. Black farmers had the will and tools to farm, but no land. The sort of white farmers who entered into relationships with sharecroppers had land, but were often undercapitalised and required black farmers to produce a decent surplus. The relationship was thus, on the one hand, one of mutual dependence. Yet it was also deeply threatening. For if white farmers needed black sharecroppers, the latter also represented potentially ruinous competition. It was this inherently unstable mix that animated the emergence, in the Caledon Valley and elsewhere, of a rough and stark form of racial paternalism. The nakedness of the paternalism was an attempt to elide the mutual dependence, to force a distinction between black agricultural producers and white producers that may otherwise have been too blurred for comfort.

This cocktail of mutual dependence and animosity, of cooperation and betrayal, creates, as one might expect, cross-racial relationships of great complexity. As Charles van Onselen has written in his magisterial study of South African sharecropping:

Currents of anger, betrayal, hatred and humiliation surge through many accounts of

modern South Africa's race relations, but what analysts sometimes fail to understand is that without prior compassion, dignity, love or a feeling of trust – no matter how small, poorly or unevenly developed – there could have been no anger, betrayal, hatred or humiliation. The troubled relationship between black and white South Africans cannot be fully understood by focusing on what tore them apart and ignoring what held them together.<sup>8</sup>

Families on either side of the Caledon River thus have a great deal of history. Talking about his relationships with the people on the other side of the border, a fruit and vegetable farmer in the Ladybrand district told researchers in 1998 that:

We have a very complicated [employment] arrangement. We don't really distinguish between Basotho and our local people because the village they come from – Ha Fusi – basically grew up with the farm. Its existence is to do with our existence and a lot of families are intermarried with villages across the way. We've had maybe three or four generations working here.<sup>9</sup>

The troubled relationship between black and white South Africans cannot be fully understood by focusing on what tore them apart and ignoring what held them together

One can be sure that the generations-old relationship between Ha Fusi and 'the farm' is a nuanced and intricate one. One can only imagine that the people of Ha Fusi have thick, cherished ties to the farm on the one hand, but are at the same time acutely, perhaps resentfully, aware that their very dependence on the farm is the result of a political defeat suffered three or four generations ago. Such a relationship is perhaps too intricate to grasp for the armed and uniformed men who sometimes patrol

between Ha Fusi and the farm.

A more recent development in the history of the Caledon Valley is important to note. In the 1970s and 1980s, South Africa's gold mines were by far the largest employers of Basotho. In 1990, 127,000 Basotho men worked in the South African mining industry, and the wages they remitted home accounted for 63 per cent of Lesotho's GDP. In the late 1980s, the South African gold mining industry began a process of radical downsizing. By 2003, the number of Basotho in the South African gold mining industry had declined to about 65,000. The loss to the Basotho economy went well beyond the sum of their remittances. During the latter half of the 20th century, Basotho used migrant remittances from the mines to capitalise agricultural production. The consequences of the mine retrenchments thus spread quickly to Lesotho's agricultural sector. Since the mid-1980s, Lesotho's agricultural output has fallen by about 40%.<sup>10</sup>

This devastating turn of events in Lesotho has left its mark on the Free State side of the border. Streams of people from households previously supported by mine wages cross the border looking for work. Some settle in shack settlements that have emerged on the outskirts of eastern Free State towns in recent years, and seek work in the Free State's kitchens and gardens. Others travel further into South Africa, as far as Gauteng, and enter the survivalist sector of the informal street trade. Many look for perennial and day work harvesting vegetables on the fruit and vegetable farms of the Caledon Valley. As we shall see shortly, this sort of farm work is a last resort, and is generally sought by members of the poorest strata of Lesotho families. The contraction of the mining labour market has thus had profound consequences for labour sourcing in the eastern Free State. As we discuss later in this section, the SANDF company that patrols the borderline has become increasingly involved in policing this labour market.

### ***Borderline security and the problem of perspective***

When we interviewed the commanding officer of the SANDF company responsible for patrolling the borderline, he told us that cattle theft and grazing theft are among the most significant problems his troops face. The SANDF regards grazing theft as the more prolific and serious of the two. The land along the Caledon River is fertile and lends itself to irrigation farming. Irrigated vegetables are grown in several of the agricultural districts that border Lesotho. Ficksburg, for instance, has become a successful asparagus-growing district in the last two decades. The SANDF believes that grazing theft is the greatest risk faced by South African irrigation farmers along the borderline. Lesotho herdsmen drive their cattle across the river to graze and destroy vegetable fields on the South African side of the border.

The commanding officer told us that policing grazing theft is extremely difficult. Herdsmen, he told us, are capable of controlling their herds from the other side of the river; they thus do not need to cross into South Africa to commit grazing theft. Herdsmen have also developed elaborate early warning systems, the commanding officer told us; it is very difficult to surprise them. "The only effective way to combat the problem," he told us, "is with helicopter operations. You swoop in quickly, giving their early warning system no time to kick in, drop in troops and surround the cattle."

But even then, the commanding officer complained, success breeds its own problems. The only cattle

pound along the border is at Zastron, which is at the southern end of the borderline. Transporting cattle there is seldom practicable. Often, the Company's troops are reduced to driving the cattle back across the border.

The picture of his work the commanding officer painted was thus particularly bleak. He understood his relationship with Basotho herdsmen as a cat-and-mouse game, one in which the cat could only lose. For even on the rare occasions the mouse is caught, he loses very little. His cattle are simply driven back across the river; being caught has cost him next to nothing. If the commanding officer is right, the presence of the SANDF on the borderline is simply not a deterrent against grazing theft.

One particular piece of information the commanding officer gave us turned out to be particularly striking in retrospect. He said that when he began his job on the borderline, he was shown SANDF statistics on cross-border crime. One particular figure stood out: of the 156 South African farms along the borderline, 104 had been abandoned, mostly as a result of cattle- and grazing theft. These figures were not only shocking; they were so precise, so we took them for granted as true. Moreover, they were backed up by the public pronouncements of prominent organisations active in the area. In March 2005, for instance, the president of Free State Agriculture Louw Steytler announced that farmers along the borderline were going to sue the government for failure to protect them, arguing that their right to security had been violated.<sup>11</sup>

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Yet we interviewed several farmers along the borderline over the following days and not a single one of them was aware of anyone who had abandoned a border farm because of crime. Almost all agreed that crime was a very serious problem. And most knew somebody who had abandoned farming, but because of tough market conditions, not crime. Indeed, several farmers pointed out that the fertility of the land along the river means that some border farms have high market values. Two farmers we interviewed had put border farms on the market within the previous 12 months, attracted considerable interest, and sold land without much trouble. Needless to say, this constitutes an extravagant contradiction to the claim that more than two-thirds of the farms along the borderline have been abandoned.

We are not suggesting that grazing- and livestock theft are spectres invented by professional soldiers. As the following section shows, the problem of theft is grave indeed. However, the story above does go to show



that one's profession is a powerful factor in shaping how one understands the border.

Indeed, on the same day we interviewed the SANDF company's commanding officer, we spoke to the station commissioner at a police station in a border town in the Caledon Valley. The station commissioner's jurisdiction encompassed a large swathe of the borderline itself. When we asked him how the presence of the borderline shapes his work, he told us bluntly that it didn't. His overriding priority, he told us, which had been established at national level in the SAPS at the beginning of the financial year, was to cut the rate of contact crimes by 7 per cent. A negligible proportion of his jurisdiction's reported contact crimes occurred on the border. The vast majority occurred in the local central business district, township and informal settlement, on weekend evenings and in the days following payday. "The borderline," he told us, "is simply not a major generator of serious crime in my jurisdiction."

It was a striking contrast. In a single day, we met two senior security officials along the borderline. The first believed with all sincerity that he was the last line of defence for a precarious way of life. The second did not believe there was much reason to mount a defence at all. The point of the story is to suggest that there is often a large discrepancy between a security agency's understanding of the role it plays, and the actual effects of its presence. In the following section, we argue that the borderline patrol is perhaps best understood as a fairly marginal player in a long history of mutual, but precarious accommodation.

### ***Farmers, the borderline and modes of accommodation***

As we travelled along the border with SANDF personnel, one of the soldiers told us a story about a farmer he found troublesome. "His farm is on the border," the soldier told us. "To patrol along the river in this area, we need to use the gate in the fence on his farm. He keeps that gate locked and refuses to give us a key. That is illegal. We must have access to the borderline, and he is obliged to give us access. One of these days we are going to tear down his gate."

Several days later, we interviewed the farmer in question and asked him what he thought of the SANDF using his gate to access the borderline. He told us he was ambivalent about the presence of the SANDF on his farm. He appreciated being protected against trespassers, but he did not appreciate being penalised for the manner in which he chose to relate to his neighbours across the border.

"We have an informal arrangement," he told us. "Every year, I set aside a piece of my land for Basotho grazing. They bring their cattle across the river, and they pay me a small amount for the use of my land. It is a really small amount; I lose a lot of money, because I should be using that land for my own farming. But I consider it an unfortunate cost of farming in this area. Because, in truth, I am scared to say no when they ask if they can graze on my farm. If I say no, they might punish me by stealing my cattle, or by grazing their own cattle on the land where my cattle graze. It's a bit of an insurance policy. Not foolproof, but wise."

Now, the Basotho cattle and herdsmen come straight across the river to my farm. Strictly speaking, that's illegal. They are meant to use the official gate. They don't because they can't. It's too far away. So, ja, having the soldiers come through my farm is not entirely a good thing. Farming here is tough. I must be allowed some flexibility in the way I farm, and in the agreements I make with the people on the other side."

### **The borderline patrol is ... a fairly marginal player in a long history of mutual, but precarious accommodation**

The farmer's argument is simple. He farms along a river. On the other side, there are dense settlements of poverty-stricken, land-hungry people. They have century-long memories that tell them that this situation is unjust, that some of what he has is rightfully theirs. So long as the SANDF is incapable of defending his agricultural property, he needs to adjust to and accommodate his neighbours. It hardly a stable situation; it is, in fact, uncomfortably precarious. But, given the circumstances, he believes it is the best he can do.

That is one form of accommodation.

There are others. Indeed, there are probably as many forms of accommodation as there are farmers on the borderline. While visiting the borderline, we were told of a farmer, whom we did not meet, who chose a very different mode of accommodation. Until the late 1990s, he was a prominent dairy farmer in the Ladybrand district. The number of cattle he lost to cross-border theft escalated steadily every year. He calculated that the cost of protecting himself from agricultural theft was too high, and that asking his workers to put themselves in danger in defence of his cattle was unreasonable. So he turned his commanding view of the Caledon Valley into an asset, built a restaurant and a lodge, and branded his new enterprise as a place for corporate retreats and bosberaads. He has shrunk his farming operation to the point that all his agricultural assets are in sight of the farmhouse.

This is, perhaps, the most successful mode of accommodation we came across. However, it also

illustrates just how precarious farming on the border is. For whilst the farmer in this example did not abandon his farm, as the commanding officer of the SANDF company might have expected, he did indeed abandon farming.

A third mode of accommodation: we met a dairy farmer in the Hobhouse district. He lost 14 head of cattle to theft in 2001, and 12 head in 2002. He told us that he was wedded to his land and wedded to dairy farming. Converting his farm into a tourist lodge, or farming vegetables instead of dairy, or selling up and going to live in town, were not options. He had no choice but to make dairy farming viable.

He told us that in the last three years, he had used two means that together made dairy farming viable. He and two other farmers in the area employed former 32 Battalion Khoi-San trackers to guard their livestock. The former soldiers live in tents on their employers' grazing land. They are armed, and guard their employers' livestock 24 hours a day. Since he began employing the trackers in 2003, he says, he has experienced only one incident of stock theft.

Nonetheless, employing former soldiers comes at a price. "Some of my neighbours refuse to employ Bushman trackers," he told us, "because it is bad for labour relations. You have the same families living and working on your farm since your grandfather's times, and you come and tell them there is no work for them anymore because you have hired men with R4 rifles in their place. What I've done is I've kept all my labour, even though I don't need it as much as I used to. So security ends up being my biggest expense."

The dairy farmer told us that his second most valuable asset was his direct line to a detective in the local SAPS stock theft unit. The unit has jurisdiction to cross into Lesotho in pursuit of suspects and to arrest them, as long as Lesotho police officers are present. Suspects apprehended in Lesotho are, of course, tried in Lesotho rather than South Africa. The dairy farmer told us he valued the unit's detectives because they were fast and efficient trackers and thus often retrieved sheep and cattle alive. He was dismissive of Lesotho's criminal justice process. He was motivated to turn to the stock theft unit, not to bring livestock thieves to justice, but to get his livestock back. Through the work of the stock theft unit, farmers commonly traced their livestock to butcheries, either in Lesotho villages or in Maseru itself. In a sign of the state of economic desperation on the Lesotho side of the border, one farmer told us that the butcher on whose premises his livestock were found had paid R600 for 12 sheep to the thieves who had stolen them.

We asked the dairy farmer about the role of the SANDF borderline patrol in defending his property. He said he was glad the SANDF company was there, but that it was by necessity a minor player. He pointed out that about 100 troops and officers were on duty at any time, covering a 450km stretch of border, which amounted to a single soldier every 4,5 km. "I'm pleased when they are active in the area," he told us, "but they cannot guard every farm on this border single-handed. The very idea is ridiculous."

Finally, we met the proprietor of a large fruit and vegetable farm north of Ladybrand, who was a strong advocate of an open border with Lesotho. He argued that the presence of the SANDF on the border was counterproductive and had damaged cross-border relations. "Patrolling the border has broken down relationships," he argued. "The Caledon was established as the border 150 years ago; the Basotho have been crossing it ever since. They always have and they always will. Having a company of armed men on the border doesn't stop people from crossing it. It just sours relationships and makes co-existence more difficult."

### A free cross-border labour market, in which poverty-stricken Basotho women could be freely hired on daily contracts, is highly desirable ... in the Caledon Valley

The proprietor told us he was involved in an initiative to develop commercial cooperative farms on the Lesotho side of the border. Emerging Basotho farmers, he argued, could use his access to international fresh-food markets, rendering agricultural development in Lesotho mutually beneficial.

Asked about grazing theft, he replied that in the half century his family had farmed in the district, they found that investing in consistent communication with communal leaders across the border paid dividends. "It's a question of how you respond to grazing theft," he told us. "Some people respond by shooting cattle that trespass. For a Basotho, a cattle is his all. He will retaliate. He will burn your crops."

It is possible that the proprietor was being a little disingenuous. As the manager of a large irrigation farm, his business is heavily dependent on perennial contract workers (unlike the dairy and beef farmers cited above who employ a handful of fulltime workers and require little or no perennial labour). A free cross-border labour market, in which poverty-stricken Basotho women could be freely hired on daily contracts, is highly desirable for those who irrigate in the Caledon Valley. Moreover, as a large commercial enterprise, the farm has the financial means to employ a level of private security family businesses cannot afford. In other words, were the border to come down, the fruit and vegetable farm would be in a position to recruit those Basotho it needs, and keep out those who threaten it.



Nonetheless, the central thrust of the proprietor's point remains valid; farmers on the borderline negotiate a *modus vivendi* with their neighbours across the river. What sort of accommodations farmers make varies from one case to the next, and depends upon a host of factors. Many vegetable farmers covet Basotho workers, but fear Basotho cattle. Some beef farmers, on the other hand, are relieved when their neighbours ask to rent grazing land, because it means that they are open to establishing a predictable relationship, one structured by a set of unwritten norms. Another factor that shapes the *modus vivendi* is the idiosyncratic history of the relationship between each farm and each village. The nature of such relationships can vary from one farm to the next.

The point is that the border is by its nature porous, and the role of borderline patrol cannot possibly be to seal it. Irrespective of the presence of the SANDF, those who inhabit the borderline are condemned to enter into modes of mutual accommodation with one another, some modes stable and successful, others fragile and prone to tragedy. The SANDF can either assist in the management of these relationships, or hinder them. Chances are it does a fair amount of both. Borderline patrols are blunt instruments, and the way of life that has evolved on the borderline is intricate and irreducible.

Finally, it ought to be noted that the defining social features of the Lesotho/Free State borderline are by no means unique to the Caledon Valley. Commercial farms on one side of a border, the derelict and densely populated land of a struggling peasantry on the other; such is the case in several parts of South Africa where commercial farmland lies adjacent to former Bantustans. The northern- and southernmost zones of the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands immediately come to mind, as well as the commercial farmland that surrounds parts of the former homelands of Gazankulu and Lebowa in Limpopo. As in the Caledon Valley, racial relationships in these areas are old, intricate and fraught. The fragile accommodations of the residents of the Caledon Valley have many echoes. The presence of an international border between the protagonists is not a defining feature of the situation.

In some of these 'border zones', the *modus vivendi* has indeed broken down. There are, for instance, farming districts north of Greytown in KwaZulu-Natal that have been more or less abandoned by commercial farmers; the 'border' has advanced, so to speak, and what was commercial farmland a decade ago, is now host to settlements of the rural poor. Why has such a situation not come to pass in the Caledon Valley? Is it because of the existence of an international border,

patrolled by the SANDF? It is not possible to do justice to this question here, but we could perhaps hazard a provisional answer that the state of social relations in the Caledon Valley probably has more to do with the particular history of those relations than with the presence of patrols on the borderline.

### Basotho contract workers and border farms

Among the effects of the large-scale retrenchment of Basotho men from the gold mining industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a surge in the numbers of Basotho seeking employment as seasonal labourers on the vegetable farms of the Caledon Valley. Unfortunately, we do not know of any study conducted in recent years on this section of the labour market, but research conducted in the late 1990s is very illuminating indeed.

In 1992, the Lesotho Labour Office had on record 1,500 Basotho seasonal labourers working legally on Free State farms. By 1998, the number had swelled to 7,000; Basotho now accounted for 10 per cent of

all legally employed seasonal workers in the Free State province.<sup>12</sup> It has long been established that seasonal work on the eastern Free State's vegetable farms is regarded as a last resort by Basotho women, a sign that all other avenues into the labour market have been closed.<sup>13</sup> This is amply confirmed by Ulicki and Crush's 1998 findings. Of the 122 legally employed contract workers and 40 illegal workers they interviewed, 25 per cent reported that they came from a household with a regular wage earner. At that time, 54 per cent of Lesotho households had regular wage earners. Moreover, 49 per cent of Ulicki and Crush's sample came from

households that owned livestock. At the time, 69.4 per cent of Lesotho households owned livestock.<sup>14</sup> It was thus the poorest of Lesotho's poor who sought employment as seasonal workers on Free State farms. Another sign of desperate straits is that whilst seasonal farm labour is historically considered to be women's work in Lesotho, a quarter of Ulicki and Crush's respondents were men.

There are various accounts of the social factors that have pushed poverty-stricken Basotho to seek seasonal work on Free State farms. Ulicki and Crush suggest that many are from households in which a breadwinning gold mine worker has been recently retrenched; that family patriarchs send women to do 'women's work' in desperate times.<sup>15</sup> Coplan and Thoahlane have argued that the gold mining retrenchments have in fact triggered the breakdown of family units; that "an increasingly prevalent phenomenon is the wife who heads off to South Africa or to a border town to find

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work, promising to send money and to return as soon as she can, never to be heard from again. Others make no such promises but simply inform their husband that that now that he has lost his job he is losing his wife and the mother of his children as well.”<sup>16</sup>

To recruit Basotho labour legally, South African farmers need to comply with a set of regulations established by the Lesotho Labour Commission (LLC). For each worker a farmer recruits, he signs a contract stipulating the terms and conditions of employment, including the rate of remuneration. He is obliged to provide each worker he recruits with free transport to and from his farm, free accommodation and three free meals per day for the duration of the worker’s stay on his farm, and free medical treatment. Among the functions of the LLC is to ensure, on the workers’ behalf, that farmers comply with these conditions. For instance, before a South African farmer is granted a licence to recruit Basotho labour, an LLC representative is required to inspect the farm, its standards of worker accommodation in particular. If a farmer breaches his contract in any way, seasonal workers are entitled to lodge a complaint with the LLC.<sup>17</sup>

And yet, given that the market for Basotho labour on the border farms is very much a buyers’ market, it appears that many of these stipulations are practiced in the breach. This was certainly the case when Ulicki and Crush conducted their study in the late 1990s. For instance, the majority of Basotho workers they surveyed said they believed they were paid less than was stipulated in their contract; 30 per cent said that the cost of meals, accommodation and medical care was deducted from their wages; nearly 60 per cent said they had their wages withheld until the day they returned to Lesotho; 40 per cent said they were not permitted to leave the farm for the duration of their contract. Nor were their grievances welcome at LLC offices. One of Ulicki and Crush’s respondents commented: “We are told there are many people in Lesotho waiting to come to the farms. If we were not willing to work we would be sent home.”<sup>18</sup>

What are the relative prices of South African seasonal labour on the one hand, and legally and illegally recruited Basotho labour on the other? Ulicki and Crush’s figures are unfortunately seven years old, and we could not find a more recent study of wage rates for seasonal labour in the eastern Free State. Nonetheless, Ulicki and Crush’s finding was that the average price of a South African seasonal worker’s wage was R85,64 per month, compared to R225,29 per month for a legally recruited Mosotho seasonal worker, and R196 per month for an illegally recruited Mosotho worker.<sup>19</sup>

## **Seasonal labour and labour market policy**

The South African government has neither the capacity nor the will to stop Basotho entering South Africa to seek work. But it does have the capacity to shape and regulate the use of seasonal Basotho labour in the Caledon Valley. This is so for several reasons. First, there is a finite number of farms on the borderline and policing each one is by no means beyond the capacity of the SANDF company that patrols the borderline. Secondly, whilst seasonal workers themselves might not be deterred by the prospect of being caught working illegally, farmers are quite easily deterred. A vegetable farmer who loses his entire labour force in the middle of the harvesting season loses a great deal. The knowledge that there is a reasonable chance of being caught is thus a strong deterrent against employing workers illegally.

In theory, then, the South African government is in a position to write the labour market policy it wants, since it knows it has the capacity to enforce it. What are the options? One is to stop policing farms for illegal labour and thus to create a *de facto* free labour market across the border. Given the surging demand for work among Basotho, this would surely lead to declining wages and working conditions, but higher levels of employment. A second option would be to institute a total ban on the recruitment of Basotho labour in the Caledon Valley. The South African government did signal its intention to do precisely this in the late 1990s, but backed off in the face of resistance from both farmers and the Lesotho government.<sup>20</sup> A third option would be to keep the status quo, which would be to leave the monitoring of existing regulations to the somewhat capricious and inconsistent LLC.

The question of foreign participation in domestic labour markets is deeply polarised, and evidence-based thinking is prone to give way to dogmatic mantras. For instance, a common ‘pro-migrant worker’ position takes as an axiom that unskilled immigrants take jobs that natives do not want. This is a common argument among irrigation farmers in the Caledon Valley. Asparagus farmers in particular, who appear to be the heaviest recruiters of Basotho labour, argue that South Africans are simply not prepared to pick asparagus. As Ulicki and Crush observed in the late 1990s:

Farmers are adamant that there is insufficient South African labour willing to work on farms. Asparagus producers claim to have a particularly difficult time finding local labour since asparagus harvesting requires workers to

The South African government has neither the capacity nor the will to stop Basotho entering South Africa to seek work





be on the fields picking around 5am, before the sun is strong. To be on time, workers must live on the farm and away from their families. Asparagus farm workers are also required to work seven days a week.<sup>21</sup>

The farmers Ulicki and Crush spoke with are no doubt being sincere. But their answers still beg the most important question, which is under what conditions South Africans *would* be prepared to work on their farms. As the American scholar Christopher Jencks had argued in the context of that country's debate on unskilled immigrants, whilst it is sometimes true that unskilled immigrants take jobs that natives don't want:

We still have to ask why natives do not want these jobs. The reason is not that natives reject demeaning or dangerous work. Almost every job that immigrants do in Los Angeles or New York is done by natives in Detroit and Philadelphia. When natives turn down such jobs in New York or Los Angeles, the reason is that by local standards the wages are abysmal. Far from proving that immigrants have no impact on natives, the fact that American-born workers sometimes reject jobs that immigrants accept reinforces the claim that immigration has depressed wages for unskilled work.<sup>22</sup>

Following Jencks, the real question to ask is not whether South Africans are prepared to work on asparagus farms, but how expensive South African labour would be in the absence of Basotho labour. We would also want to know whether the asparagus sector could afford the price of South African labour. We do not know the answers to either of these questions. Ulicki and Crush's figures are old, and they are not sector specific. Anecdotal and indirect evidence, though, would suggest that South African labour would be a good deal more expensive than Basotho labour, not least because young, unskilled South Africans who remain connected to their extended families retain some sort of access to state pensions, child grants and disability grants. There is some fairly strong evidence to suggest that the existence of these welfare benefits does indeed push up the price of unskilled labour. In 2000, for instance, three Princeton University economists published a study of a sample of South African households that revealed "a sharp drop in the labour force participation of prime-age men when the elder women of the household reach 60, and the elder men 65, the respective ages of pension eligibility".<sup>23</sup>

So, it is quite possible that South African labour is simply too expensive to make labour intensive

asparagus (and other forms of irrigation) farming in the Caledon Valley viable. If this is the case, and if Lesotho and its citizens were to vanish tomorrow, asparagus farmers would either mechanise or use their land for other purposes. In this scenario, asparagus farmers get richer as a result of the availability of Basotho labour, and nobody gets poorer. There are no losers, not in South Africa at any rate. (The losers are those asparagus farmers around the world who compete on the same markets as South Africans.) Alternatively, it is possible that the asparagus sector can in fact afford South African labour, and would indeed buy it were Lesotho to vanish tomorrow. In this scenario, banning Basotho labour from the Caledon Valley would make farmers poorer, but unskilled South African workers and their families richer. As I said earlier, we do not know which of these scenarios is correct. What we can say is that when foreign nationals participate in domestic labour markets, there are always winners and losers; that who wins and who loses cannot be determined *a priori*; that it is an empirical question.

Whilst we do not know the answers to these questions, it may be worth mentioning that international experience suggests that once an economic sector becomes dependent on foreign-sourced cheap labour, its cost structure quickly comes to rely on the presence of this labour; that dependence thus becomes structural and permanent. The decision to open a labour market to cross-border labour is thus often a long-term decision, whether it is intended as such or not. For instance, During World War I and World War II, Californian farmers persuaded the US government to make exceptions to general immigration policies and provide the agricultural sector with cheap seasonal labour from Mexico.

The exception was meant to be temporary, but in fact "had the effect of institutionalising dependence of farmers on 1–2 million Mexican workers, who returned year after year. Farms, railroads and mines soon made business decisions under the assumption that immigrant workers would be available when they were needed."<sup>24</sup> By the early 1960s, these migrant workers constituted four-fifths of harvest workers in California's tomato processing industry. The industry's dependence on them was broken only with the introduction of accelerated mechanised harvesting methods in the late 1960s.

There is, of course, an argument, and a serious and credible one at that, that the South African government should not even attempt to make these calculations; that whatever the consequences for South Africans, we do not have the moral authority to prevent Lesotho's citizens from working on South African farms, or indeed, in other South African labour markets. This is both a

Once an economic sector becomes dependent on foreign-sourced cheap labour, its cost structure quickly comes to rely on the presence of this labour ...

popular and a populist argument among Basotho, but no less worthy for it. Basotho did indeed, through their labour, help build South Africa's richest industry of the 20th century, and, in the process, became dependent on, and integrated into, the South African economy. To spurn the Basotho now that their only asset is unwanted labour is callous reparation indeed.

### **Basotho traders in South Africa**

Basotho seeking work in South Africa of course look a great deal further than the farms of the Caledon Valley. A great many try to make a living retailing and manufacturing in the informal economy in towns and cities throughout the country. As with farm workers, the net effect of Basotho entrepreneurs and traders on both the South African and Lesotho economies is an empirical question, and we know of no serious attempt to measure it. There is, nonetheless, still a fair amount to be said.

There is a body of literature associated largely with the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) which has devoted itself to documenting the contribution of informal sector cross-border traders to the South African economy.<sup>25</sup> One of the explicit aims of the project is to refute the popular prejudice that "non-South African street traders are 'illegal', 'ill-educated' new arrivals who take opportunities from South Africans and money from the country".<sup>26</sup> The project has focused on the veritable explosion of non-South African street traders and small manufacturers who have set up shop in the streets of South Africa's cities since the early 1990s. All the studies cited above have found that the majority are young and male, are well educated, do not bring their families, and have no intention of settling in South Africa permanently. They are 'transmigrants', 'connected to strong informal and formal transnational networks of trade, entrepreneurship and migration'.<sup>27</sup>

The crux of the project's argument is that despite their non-recognition and their informal status (most enter South Africa on visitors' visas), foreign cross-border traders represent an expansion of Africa's rich and lucrative continental trade networks to the South African economy, creating jobs for South Africans, exporting locally manufactured goods throughout the continent, and stimulating local entrepreneurs to enter the transcontinental trade. Most of the studies have found that cross-border traders use local suppliers, and thus invest in the domestic economy, are significant exporters of electronics, appliances, clothes, household goods and shoes, and, rather than stealing jobs from South Africans, are modest employers of South African labour.

The SAMP project occasionally suffers a little from its overenthusiasm for its own agenda. It is as if the researchers are presenting cross-border traders to a panel of judges and feel they need to conceal the warts and powder the wrinkles. For instance, Peberdy and Crush insist it is a myth that "informal sector participants are poverty-stricken and desperate people engaged in a struggle to "survive"" or that "foreign migrants are flooding to South Africa to flee a desperate situation at home".<sup>28</sup> In fact, there is much to suggest many foreign 'entrepreneurs' join the ranks of a large and dismal survivalist sector. In 2001, for instance, a survey of 170 immigrant street traders in the Durban inner city painted a grim portrait of the sector.<sup>29</sup> Judging from their self-reported income, most, perhaps all the respondents, are best termed survivalists. The authors report their findings in this regard eccentrically, but one can get the gist: "Forty per cent of foreign traders," Hunter and Skinner write, "earn profit in a good week of between R101 and R249, whilst 60 per cent of these traders in a bad week earn less than R100."<sup>30</sup> Sadly, the dire straits of Hunter and Skinner's respondents appears representative of self-employment in South

Africa generally. According to the latest national labour force survey, conducted in September 2003, almost two-thirds of self-employed people in South Africa earn less than R500 per month.<sup>31</sup>

How many Basotho informal traders find themselves among the grim survivalists of Hunter and Skinner's study, and how many among the innovative and ambitious cross-border traders Peberdy, Rogerson *et al* write about, is, once again, an empirical question, one which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been asked. Nonetheless, even if it tends to oversell its findings, the animating arguments of the SAMP project remain

important and compelling. There can be little doubt that the cross-border trading that accompanies Basotho migration to South Africa represents a net gain for both countries. For instance, according to South African Tourism figures, almost 1,5 million Basotho legally entered South Africa during 2004, and among them spent more than R3,8 billion in the South African economy.<sup>32</sup> Most of these people probably entered South Africa on short-term visitor permits, but one can be sure that in reality a great many are 'transmigrants' who cross the border to trade. The R3,8 billion is an imperfect, somewhat obscure record of that trade.

As Altbeker and Leggett point out, the existence of much of this trade is entirely dependent upon the presence of transmigrants in South Africa. They write that:

Cross-border trade, particularly in societies in which the infrastructure of commerce is

Almost 1,5 million Basotho legally entered South Africa during 2004, and among them spent more than R3,8 billion in the South African economy

under-developed and unreliable, often requires the existence of relationships of trust between parties to transactions. This being so, it may be that South Africans simply cannot access some markets in neighbouring countries. Migrants, on the other hand, have established kinship and commercial networks and may be able to access these markets. Migrants may be essential, in other words, to the penetration of foreign markets for South African goods.<sup>33</sup>

Comparisons here are interesting. Among them, German and American visitors to South Africa spent R3,8 billion during 2004, precisely the same figure as visitors from Lesotho. Popular wisdom would have it that South Africa ought to be tempting developed country visitors to our shores while discouraging economic migrants from neighbouring countries like Lesotho. The figures seem to suggest that we have dramatically, perhaps comically, undervalued our neighbours.

The ironies are sharp indeed. It is quite possible that efforts to dissuade cross-border movement have hampered cross-border trade and thus caused a net loss to the South African economy. It may well be that it is in South Africa's interests to invest in and nurture the cross-border trade by, for instance, establishing micro-financing schemes for cross-border trading start-ups, and by cutting red tape at the major border posts between Lesotho and the Free State.

## Conclusion

The subject of this paper is a borderline between two countries that are administratively and politically separate, but deeply intertwined at the levels of economy, society and history. We dealt with two limited and discrete aspects of this context: the presence of armed border control forces between neighbours who share a complex and troubled history; and the presence of labour market controls in South Africa in a situation where Basotho come to seek work in droves.

In regard to borderline control, we pointed out that in the context of an intricate and opaque history of cross-border neighbourliness, the presence of armed and uniformed men on the river is a blunt instrument indeed. To be sure, it is probable that most commercial farmers on the South African side of the river regard the presence of borderline control agents as vital, and would like to see it strengthened rather than weakened. Nonetheless, if anyone who lives on that borderline truly believes that the role of the SANDF should be to seal it, that belief is little more than a fantasy. The reality is those who live and work

on that borderline must, ineluctably and inevitably, negotiate modes of accommodation with their cross-border neighbours, sometimes successfully, sometimes precariously, sometimes tragically. The SANDF is in all probability no more than a minor player in the politics of this accommodation.

Concerning the participation of Basotho in South African labour markets, we pointed out that such participation must as a matter of course create winners and losers in South Africa; that determining the costs and benefits is an empirical question; and that to the best of our knowledge, this empirical determination has not been made. This is unfortunate, because it means that the consequences of current labour market policies are unknown. Does the recruitment of Basotho seasonal workers on the farms of the Caledon Valley lower the wages of South Africans? Do bureaucratic obstacles to the cross-border movement of commercial goods reduce the flow of valuable informal trade? The answers to both these questions could well be yes, but we do not know.

Any policy review should be informed in part by such calculations, but only in part, because there are other matters to consider as well. One is whether South Africa has the moral authority to implement policies that increase the collective hardships of the Basotho. The long and deep layers of interconnectedness between the two countries confer a great deal of moral responsibility on South Africa in regard to the future of Lesotho.

Finally, any policy review must take cognisance of the limits of the possible. No policy is better than the people and the culture that implement it. In the

northern provinces of South Africa, xenophobia is so rife among state officials who encounter foreigners, that the spirit of the law often finds itself incapable of penetrating practice. In Johannesburg, for instance, it is not uncommon for *bona fide* refugees to be turned away from the emergency rooms of public hospitals, nor for their children to be turned away from schools, despite the fact that they have every right to access these institutions.<sup>34</sup>

In regard to Basotho who enter or remain in South Africa illegally, it appears that the opposite tendency predominates. Given the ethnic and linguistic identity between the citizens of Lesotho and many South Africans, as well as the presence of Lesotho nationals in South Africa for generations, police and immigration officials appear to move against Lesotho nationals with some reluctance. In the late 1990s, for instance, when Mozambicans were being forcibly repatriated at a rate of about 150,000 a year, only 6,000 to 7,000 Basotho

The long and deep layers of interconnectedness ... confer a great deal of moral responsibility on South Africa in regard to the future of Lesotho

were being forcibly repatriated a year. This was in a context where about 130,000 Basotho were recorded as having overstayed their entry permits each year.<sup>35</sup>

As argued earlier, the South African government is probably able to enforce the labour market policy it wants in the controlled, finite space of the Caledon Valley's vegetable farms. Yet beyond that, the government ought to be aware that its own limitations are severe. Any policy, for instance, premised on the assumption that it is possible to control the number of Basotho in South Africa, is a non-starter.

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## About this paper

This paper examines the role of South Africa's borderline control in shaping relationships between those who live and those who work on the borderline between Lesotho and South Africa. It explores how South African labour market policy affects the participation of Basotho in various South African labour markets, particularly those on farms along the borderline. It discusses the presence of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) on the borderline and highlights the complex and troubled history of the two neighbouring countries. Finally, this paper distils and sums up various observations and conclusions for the readers to make up their minds on the subject matter.

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## Funder



This paper and the research upon which it is based was made possible through the generous funding of the Royal Danish Government through their Embassy in South Africa.

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