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**PAST TRENDS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS  
FOR LABOUR MIGRATION TO SOUTH AFRICA**

**Alan Whiteside**

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This paper is based on a talk delivered by Mr Whiteside at the Institute in September 1985.

It should be noted that any opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author and not of the Institute.

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## Introduction

Foreign migration to South Africa has been much in the news in recent months. The South African State President has made it clear that in the event of sanctions and disinvestment being instituted against South Africa, among the first to feel the effects will be the neighbouring states and the one million workers they supply to South Africa. A figure of one million illegal (unregistered) migrants, plus the 352 000 legal migrants has been bandied about by various politicians.<sup>1</sup> This is a considerable exaggeration. At the most there are 700 000 registered and unregistered migrants working in South Africa. Nonetheless, this is a large number and the employment of, and incomes earned by, these migrants is of considerable importance to their governments and families.

This paper will look at past trends in migration and try to establish what the future prospects for foreign migration to South Africa are.

The ILO (International Labour Organization) defines a migrant worker as "a person who migrates from one country to another with a view to being employed otherwise than on his own account, and includes a person regularly admitted as a migrant for employment".<sup>2</sup> The exclusions from this definition are frontier workers and seamen. In South Africa the de facto definition of a migrant is very much broader. In effect, all Black persons who do not have residential rights in White areas but who are employed there on contracts, are migrants. This includes persons from South Africa's national states as well as foreigners. This paper will concentrate on foreign migrants.

## Sources of Labour

Up to the 1960s labour for the South African economy was drawn from all the countries of the sub-continent from Tanzania southwards. Today, according to South African statistics, labour comes from eight states. They are, in order of importance, Lesotho, Mozambique, Malawi, Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Angola. Of these countries Zimbabwe, Zambia and Angola do not permit active recruitment of their citizens although the Zimbabwean government has stated that it will not prevent its people from seeking work. Consequently these three countries are excluded from the analysis.

Table 1 shows the number and composition by nationality of migrants over the past 14 years, and Figure 1 illustrates this graphically.

It can be seen from this table and the figures that the number of registered migrants declined steadily up to the early 1980s, but since then has remained fairly constant.

Table 1:

## DISTRIBUTION OF FOREIGN BLACKS IN SOUTH AFRICA\*

	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
ANGOLA	-	42	108	623	805	1483	341	275	291	69	120	68	48
BOTSWANA	31960	46192	33357	37016	43159	43527	34464	32463	23200	29169	26262	25967	26433
LESOTHO	131749	148856	134667	152188	160634	173867	155623	152023	140746	150422	140719	145797	138443
MALAWI	131231	139714	137676	39308	12761	12412	38525	35803	32319	30602	27558	29622	29268
MOZAMBIQUE	121708	127198	139993	150738	111257	68232	49168	61550	56424	59391	52323	61218	60407
SWAZILAND	10108	10032	9984	16390	20750	18195	14054	13005	19853	13417	13659	16773	16823
ZAMBIA	-	684	703	914	766	682	843	809	918	727	787	743	1274
ZIMBABWE	-	3258	5961	8890	32716	37919	27494	21547	10377	16965	11332	7742	7492
TOTAL EXCL. OTHER	-	475968	462449	406074	382848	356326	320661	317485	284128	300762	279760	287430	280188
OTHER	14392**	9132	19864	8512	7162	1030	6390	9224	3102	996	2512	70105***	71072
TOTAL	441148	485100	482313	414586	390010	357356	327051	326709	287230	300758	282272	358035	351260

\* data for 1974 available

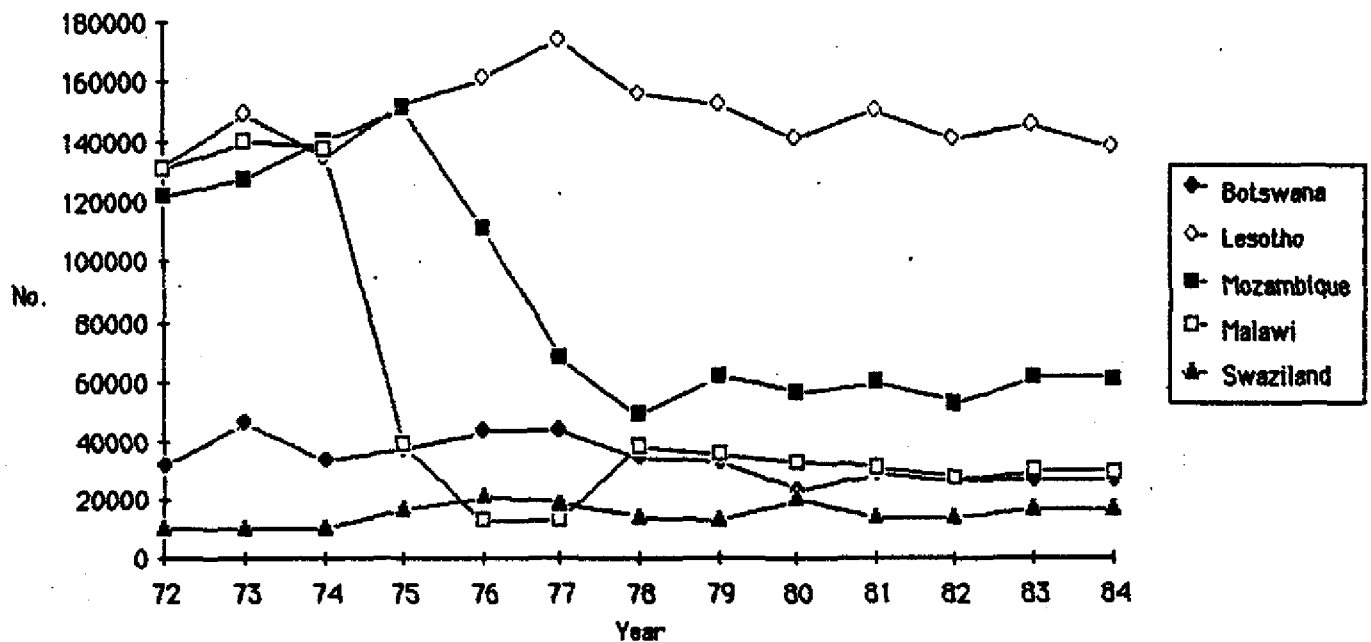
\*\* includes Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe

\*\*\* includes Namibia

- insignificant magnitude.

Source: South African Yearbooks (1973-84)

Figure 1 Migration to South Africa from Selected Countries



PAST TRENDS IN MIGRANT LABOUR

Four trends in the supply of migrant labour may be identified. They are: the fall in the overall numbers of migrants; the changing composition of the labour force by source; the decline in female migrants; and change in employment by sector. These are discussed under two headings: (a) General Trends and (b) Trends by Country.

(a) General Trends

Overall Numbers

The numbers of migrants for the past 14 years are shown in Table 1. In 1960 the number of foreign migrants was 586 000 and by 1984 it had fallen to 351 000. The figure for 1984 includes 71 000 in the category 'other' which, from South African government statistical information, is understood to include Namibians. If these people are excluded then the number of migrants will only be 280 000, an even greater decline.<sup>3</sup> Since 1980 the numbers have remained fairly constant at between 280 000 and 300 000.

Origin of Migrants

The changing makeup by nationality of numbers of migrants is shown in both Table 1 and Figure 1. It can be seen that there were major fluctuations in the composition of migrants in the mid to late 1970s. Since then the supply has been fairly steady.

The Composition by Sex

Since 1960 the number of female migrants employed in the South African economy has fallen dramatically. In 1960 about 100 000 female migrants were employed. By 1984 it had dropped to 7 000. As a proportion of migrants the decline has also been marked. This is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2      Composition by Sex of Migrant Labour (000 workers)

Year	Male	Female	Total	Female as a % of total
1960 (a)	483,9	102,4	586,4	17,5
1970 (a)	442,7	46,5	489,2	9,5
1980 (b)	296,1	31,6	327,7	9,6
1984 (c)	343,8	7,4	351,2	2,1

Source: (a) Stahl, (b) de Vletter, (c) Department of Cooperation and Development, 1984.

Sectoral Employment

The sectors in which migrants are employed have also changed over the past 14 years. The proportion employed in agriculture has declined while that employed in mining has risen. It is interesting to note, that while there has been a decline in total numbers, the percentages employed in other sectors have remained fairly constant. It is also interesting that the manufacturing sector has employed so few foreigners. The sectoral distribution and percentages of migrants is illustrated on Table 3.

Table 3      The Sectoral Employment of Migrant Labour

Sector	1970		1977		1984	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Mining	352	77,4	288	80,7	293	83,6
Agriculture	45	9,9	16	4,5	12	3,4
Manufacturing	12	2,6	10	2,8	10	2,8
Construction	6	1,3	9	2,5	6	1,7
Commerce	5	1,1	4	1,1	5	1,4
Domestic Service	21	4,6	14	3,9	12	3,4
Other	14	3,1	16	4,5	13	3,7
<b>Total</b>	<b>455</b>		<b>357</b>		<b>351</b>	

Source: 1970 and 1977: Stahl. 1984: Department of Cooperation and Development.

(b) Trends by Country

In looking at the trends and composition of the supply of migrant labour it is necessary to examine each of the supplying countries. Table 4 provides a comparative data base which gives an idea of the importance of migrant labour to these countries.

Table 4    Data Base for Labour Supplying Countries

Country & Year of Data	Pop. (000)	GNP US \$ m	Mgts	Remit. US \$ m	& of Pop.	Remit. as % of GNP
Botswana 1983	998	824	25 967	25	2,6	3
Lesotho 1982	1 400	701	140 719	367	10,0	52
Malawi 1982	6 500	1 212	27 558	12,7	0,4	1,05
Mozambique 1982	12 565	2 048	52 323	32,5	0,4	1,6
Swaziland 1981	688	404	13 559	9,2	2,0	2,3

Botswana

In 1984 some 26 000 Batswana were registered as being employed in South Africa, of whom 18 600 were employed through TEBA on the mines. Since 1981 the numbers of Batswana have remained remarkably constant.

In national terms the migrant remittances provide 3 percent of the GNP. Botswana has a small population and a relatively large 2,6 percent of the population is employed in South Africa. The mainstays of the Botswana economy are diamonds and beef, which provide over 30 percent of the GNP and as they are exported this also provides large amounts of foreign exchange, decreasing the importance of remittances. Production of these goods is intensive which means that the majority of the people play little part in the creation of the country's wealth. Indeed the populace only shares in the wealth through extensive government spending on basic needs. The majority of the inhabitants live in the rural areas and are dependent on agriculture for their incomes, and this generally provides a very poor return.

According to Botswana's manpower planners in 1981, there was a labour supply of some 417 000 persons and the manpower required for all sectors of the economy was 232 000 (including an estimate of that required for agriculture), giving a surplus of some 185 000 persons.<sup>4</sup>

Botswana is the only country to have recognised that employment in South Africa will fall and to try to predict how this will happen. The planners estimate that migrants will fall to 20 300 in 1986, 14 000 in 1991 and 6 750 in 2001, indicating that they expect an orderly reduction.



The employment picture in Botswana is bleak. The Vice-President indicated in a speech to the National Assembly that, during the 6th Plan Period, (1985-1990), the working-age population would grow at a rate of 21 000 per year, plus 2 000 returning migrants, but the number of formal and informal sector jobs could be expected to grow at only 11 500 per year.<sup>5</sup> Research in Botswana has shown that for the rural poor, migration is the only way out of the poverty trap.<sup>6</sup>

Botswana expects the number of migrants to decline and is prepared for this. At the same time it is clear that employment opportunities will not be available within the country for the growing working-age population, let alone the remaining migrants, and this is going to be an increasingly insoluble problem.

### Lesotho

Of all the countries in the world Lesotho has one of the largest proportions of its labour force employed outside its borders and is dependent on wealth generated by migrants. The number of migrants from Lesotho reached its highest level in 1977 at nearly 174 000. In 1984 there were about 138 500 Basotho employed in South Africa - the lowest number since 1975. Even so, migrant remittances accounted for some 52 percent of the GNP. Some 21 percent of the labour force was employed in South Africa, and there were three times as many people in formal-sector employment in South Africa as there were in Lesotho.

In 1978/79 it was estimated that of Lesotho's working-age population some 207 800 were either economically inactive or unemployed, while the occupation of 333 800 was given as agricultural work.<sup>7</sup> The agricultural sector in Lesotho consists mainly of subsistence activities that are not sufficiently productive to provide a satisfactory livelihood without supplementary incomes from migrant workers.

The problems of unemployment and lack of productive employment are expected to increase. The Third Development Plan stated: "Even high growth rates in employment will add only relatively few new jobs during the plan period. It is apparent that modern sector growth, even at 6 percent annually, will provide only 13 percent of the required jobs. Even if no migrants return, the modern sector is not likely to absorb more than 20 percent of the job seekers".<sup>8</sup>

A reduction in migration would have an immediate negative effect on aggregate consumption and the standard of living in Lesotho. This would be followed by a negative effect on government revenues, both those raised within Lesotho and those derived from the customs union. As Cobbe concludes, the country "is doomed to abject dependence on South Africa and foreign aid for the foreseeable future".<sup>9</sup> The only way to reduce this

dependence would be to increase employment within the country, and this will be impossible to do on the scale required.

### Malawi

Malawi is the most distant labour supplying country, and is also the only one to have voluntarily reduced its labour supply. In 1973 Malawi provided nearly 140 000 migrants, four years later numbers had fallen to about 12 500. These have since stabilised at just under 30 000.

The recruitment of Malawians was halted by their government following the crash of an aircraft carrying migrants. The reason given by the government was that they were not happy with safety standards. It has been speculated that the real reason was a shortage of labour in both the peasant and estate sectors of agriculture, and the crash simply provided an excuse.

For individual Malawians the decision to migrate was rational and maximised the return on their labour, but the government felt that it was in the national interest to keep labour at home. It is likely that the recruitment was allowed again when the government became aware of the importance of the foreign exchange brought in by the migrants.

Migrants probably account for less than 10 percent of Malawians in paid employment and only contribute just over 1 percent to GNP. Despite this, they are very important in terms of the foreign exchange earnings and the additional employment opportunities provide a bonus to the government. The Malawian government will probably want the numbers to increase; up to now the agricultural sector has been able to absorb the increasing working age population, but it will probably not be able to continue to do so.

### Mozambique

Mozambique has also experienced a marked decline in numbers employed in South Africa. Numbers peaked in 1975 at 150 000 and then fell to about 50 000 in 1978. This followed the granting of independence and the beginning of FRELIMO rule. The decline was caused by a combination of factors. Following the withdrawal of the Portuguese administration, the bureaucracy and infrastructure deteriorated considerably in effectiveness, making it harder to recruit and transport migrants. At the same time FRELIMO initially wanted to reduce numbers; and the demand for Mozambicans fell because mine managers were reluctant to recruit people they feared had been indoctrinated with socialist ideas.

For the past three to four years Mozambique has been facing an economic and political crisis. The anti-government forces of RENAMO have made

considerable gains, and a period of drought was followed by a cyclone. In March 1984, Mozambique and South Africa signed the Nkomati Accord which was intended to herald a new era of cooperation between the countries and was expected to lead to the defeat of RENAMO. Unfortunately, RENAMO appears to have found other sources of supply and is still extremely powerful.

Portions of the inter-governmental discussions that have taken place since the Nkomati Accord was signed have centred on migrant labour. Mozambique has actually sought to increase the number of migrants, arguing (correctly) that the labour agreement between the two countries provides for a minimum level of 60 000 miners to a maximum of 100 000. The need for employment opportunities for Mozambicans has increased. Their incomes provide essential government revenue and foreign exchange. The remittances are also vital to their families and in some instances have kept people from starving, since most of the migrants are drawn from the most drought-stricken areas.

It is believed that the South African government has agreed to increase the number of miners to approximately 80 000. However, it is not able to force mines to increase their Mozambican contingents. This means that such an increase is likely to be slow. The one action the government has taken is to recognise the existence of illegal Mozambican migrants working in the agricultural sector in the Eastern Transvaal, by registering and legalising their status. The number of registered Mozambicans rose from 3 075 on 30 June 1984 to 5 887 on 30 June 1985.<sup>10</sup>

The likely trend is that numbers of Mozambican migrants will steadily increase for the next few years. It is unlikely that there will be the big jump requested and desired by the Mozambique government.

### Swaziland

The number of migrants from Swaziland is the lowest of all the labour supplying countries. It peaked at 20 750 in 1976, and fell to about 13 500 in 1981 and 1982, and for the past two years it has been at 16 800. Swaziland also has the highest proportion of the working-age population employed in the formal-sector at home. In 1982/83, out of a working-age population of some 293 600, some 88 230 or 30 percent were in formal-sector employment.<sup>11</sup>

After a long period of sustained and satisfactory growth, the economy has recently entered a difficult period and early indications are that there has actually been a decline in the number of jobs. Manpower planning for the Fourth National Development Plan, has indicated that there will be a shortfall of about 3 500 formal jobs per year. This assumes that Swaziland will continue to supply the same number of new migrants each year; if not, then the shortfall will increase by a further 2 000.<sup>12</sup>

Swaziland is fortunate in that it has agricultural and traditional sectors which can absorb the population, albeit at a lower rate of return than the formal sector. Although the migrants could be absorbed into the Swazi traditional economy it is evident that it would be to Swaziland's benefit to continue supplying labour to South Africa for as long as possible. The per capita GNP is expected to fall over the next few years and any loss of migrant labour opportunities will exacerbate this fall. This will be especially true for the uneducated, rural people for whom migration is most important.

### FUTURE PROSPECTS

The final part looks at future prospects for migration to South Africa. There are three determinants that will affect this. They are: The South African demand for labour from these countries; the supply of labour; and finally political and other factors.

#### Demand for Labour

The main user of migrant labour in South Africa is the mining industry and any changes in its employment pattern would have an immediate and major effect on migration. Part of the reason for the fall in migrants since the mid-1970s has been the mines' desire to reduce their dependence on foreigners. The policy of the Chamber of Mines is to employ 60 percent of the labour force from within South Africa and the national states and 40 percent from foreign countries. The policy varies between the mining houses. For example, Gencor, one of the main groups, has a policy of employing 80 percent of its labour from white South Africa and the self-governing national states, 15 percent from the independent national states (TBVC), and Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, and 5 percent from Malawi and Mozambique.<sup>13</sup>

Unless there is a change in policy, it seems that the demand for mine labour will remain constant for at least the next decade and may even increase slightly. At the Chamber of Mines 1985 annual meeting, the outgoing President said that the industry was to invest R12 billion in new projects over the next five years creating 6 000 skilled and 40 000 unskilled jobs.<sup>14</sup> In the final analysis it is the mine managers who, within the framework of company policy, decide on what numbers will be employed from which country. It is therefore possible that the number of, say, Basotho may decrease and the number of Mozambicans increase. This is in fact quite likely to happen with increased unionisation as the Basotho are known to be active unionists while the Mozambicans are not.

The number of migrants employed in other sectors can be expected to decline steadily. In 1984, migrants employed outside the mining industry totalled

about 58 000 people or 16,4 percent of the foreign migrant labour force. The decline will probably be natural as people leave their jobs voluntarily and or retire and are replaced from the local labour force.

There is an exception to this. The number of registered Mozambicans employed in agriculture in the Eastern Transvaal can be expected to rise, but this is against the trend. The Mozambicans who move to this area to seek work are employed at low wages by the farmers. To date this has been illegal but political considerations have led to the situation being regularised and the workers being allowed to register.

### Supply of Labour

All the labour supplying countries covered in this paper are members of the Southern African Labour Commission (SALC). One of the objectives of SALC is to coordinate a gradual withdrawal of migrant labour from South Africa. This at least is the rhetoric of SALC. The reality is somewhat different. It seems that with the current economic situation in Southern Africa all the SALC countries would like to see the number of workers employed in South Africa remaining stable and would not object to it increasing. For political reasons they are not prepared to negotiate or even discuss this with the South African government (Mozambique being the exception). Only Botswana has specifically attempted to plan for a decline in the labour force employed in South Africa. All the other countries seem to have adopted a policy of keeping quiet and hoping that numbers will remain the same. It would probably be in the best interests of Lesotho and Mozambique to actually seek to negotiate an increase and a stable binding agreement on numbers. Botswana, Malawi and Swaziland can afford to decrease employment, but it will be at a cost to their economies and the poorer rural sectors of their societies. It would be interesting to see what would happen to SALC if the South African government was to start playing countries off against each other. In this situation, the united front they attempt to face South Africa with, might well crumble.

### Political and Other Factors

The South African government would like to use the migrant labour issue as part of the bargaining process in negotiations. This has been seen in the promises to increase Mozambican migrants in the post-Nkomati era; the threats to Lesotho that employment of Basotho would be halted if they did not sign an accord; and, most recently, statements that sanctions and disinvestment would mean the repatriation of foreigners employed in South Africa with the consequent dire effects on their countries and families. Up to now the number recruited from each country has to some extent been left to the individual recruiter. There is no doubt that it would be possible for the South African government to begin using migrant employment

as a stick and carrot in its relations with its Southern African neighbours. This is one of the number of imponderables affecting the future of migrants.

At present South Africa is also undergoing severe economic difficulties. Estimates of the numbers of Black people unemployed range from the 8,1 percent of the Current Population Survey to the 22 percent produced by Simkins.<sup>15</sup> An HSRC study estimated that during the period 1980-1985 the labour force would grow at a rate of some 290 000 persons per annum. Even if the GDP was to grow at 4,5 percent per annum, there would only be 134 000 new jobs per year.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, South Africa is facing its own unemployment crisis. There can be no doubt that there will be increasing pressure from all sectors to reduce the numbers of foreigners and increase employment from within the country.

#### CONCLUSION

The recent trend in employment of migrants has been downwards. The mix has changed and the proportional importance of mining has increased. The future prospect for employment of migrants in South Africa seems bleak, and there is a wide range of pressures on the South African state which will probably result in a steady decline in the employment of migrants.

Two scenarios may be envisaged. The first assumes that the South African economy recovers and there is a steady and peaceful political change within the country.

- (a) the total number of migrants will decline particularly in industries other than mining over the next five years;
- (b) mine recruitment will decline from 1990 on;
- (c) or Mozambique and Lesotho will have their special relationship recognised and most of the decline will be from the other countries; and
- (d) by 1990 all countries will have to begin reabsorbing migrant labour, as well as employing new entrants to the labour force. This will cause major problems and by the year 2000 the employment crisis will be yet another major problem facing the whole of the Southern African continent.

This scenario depends on there not being sanctions, disinvestment or major political upheaval. If, as seems likely, there are sanctions and disinvestment applied against South Africa and there is increased political upheaval within South Africa, then the scenario will be rather different. Sanctions, disinvestment and political upheaval would have an immediate negative impact on the entire economy. Unemployment can be expected to

rise sharply within South Africa with a consequent effect on migrant numbers and the result might be as follows:

- (a) An immediate decline in the number of migrants in all sectors of the economy. The mining industry will decline rather more slowly as there is a large investment in skills in foreigners that will take time to replace; and
- (b) All labour supplying countries will be adversely affected as they will have to absorb migrants and do without the remittances and foreign exchange. The most severe effects will be on Lesotho and Mozambique. There will be a fall in disposable incomes, government revenue and foreign exchange and an increase in poverty and associated problems especially in the rural area. In the short term international aid may alleviate the problem; in the long run the loss of employment opportunities and migrant remittances will be only one of the problems faced by the supplying states, if the second scenario is what actually occurs. They will also face problems of declining trade, transport difficulties and higher prices.

Even if migrant numbers decline in an orderly and planned manner it will still have a negative impact on the countries and families involved. It is hard to imagine that the problem of jobs and incomes can be addressed in such a manner as to alleviate the decline.

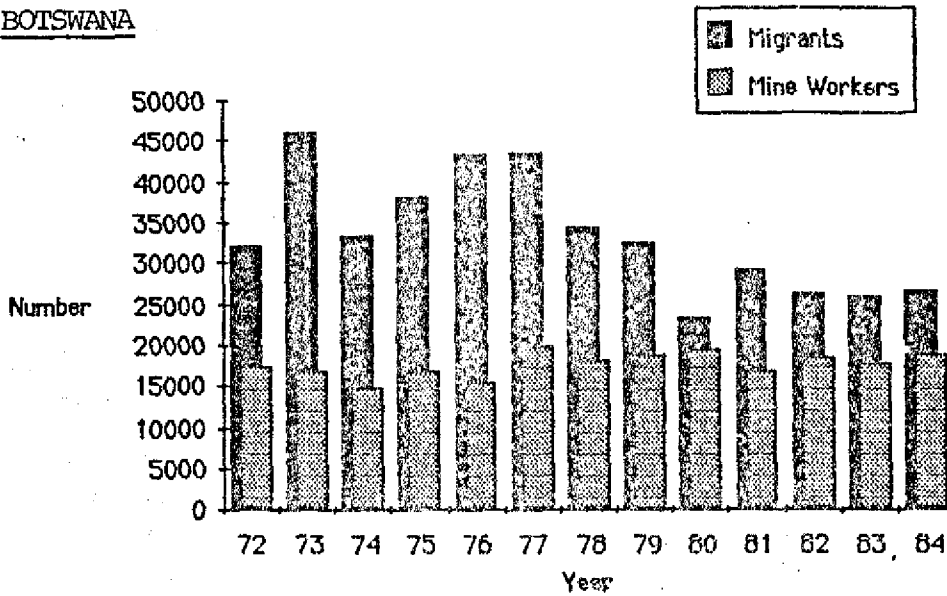
NOTES

1. Extracts from a recent address by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr D J Louis Nel, to the Afrikaanse Sakekamer, reported in SA Digest, 16 August 1985, p. 742.
2. General Survey by the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, International Labour Conference, 66th Session 1980, ILO Geneva, p. 9.
3. It is not at all clear where the 70 000 'other' migrants come from. This is something that warrants further investigation.
4. National Manpower Development Planning, 1983. A Second Report, Employment Policy Unit, Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, Gaborone, Botswana.
5. Daily News (Gaborone, Botswana), 26 July 1985.
6. J Taylor, Some Consequences of Recent Reduction in Mine Labour Recruitment in Botswana, Mimeograph 1984.
7. Annual Statistical Bulletin, 1982, Compiled and Issued by the Bureau of Statistics, Maseru, Lesotho, August 1983.
8. Third Five Year Development Plan 1980-1985, Kingdom of Lesotho, p. 83.
9. James Cobbe, "The Changing Nature of Dependence: Economic Problems in Lesotho" in The Journal of Modern African Studies 21(2), June 1983, p. 309.
10. The 1984 figure is taken from the Department of Cooperation and Development statistics. The 1985 figure was given in a discussion with officials.
11. The figures were produced as part of preparation of the Fourth National Development Plan and were communicated to the author in an unpublished form.
12. Ibid.
13. Information obtained during discussions with officials of the Chamber of Mines and the various mining houses.
14. Daily News (Durban), 26 June 1985.
15. Charles Simkins, "Structural Unemployment Revisited". SALDRU Fact Sheet 1, Cape Town, 1982.
16. S S Terblanche, J J Jacobs, Joyce van Pletzen, The Manpower Scene 1982. Research Finding MN-101 Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1983.

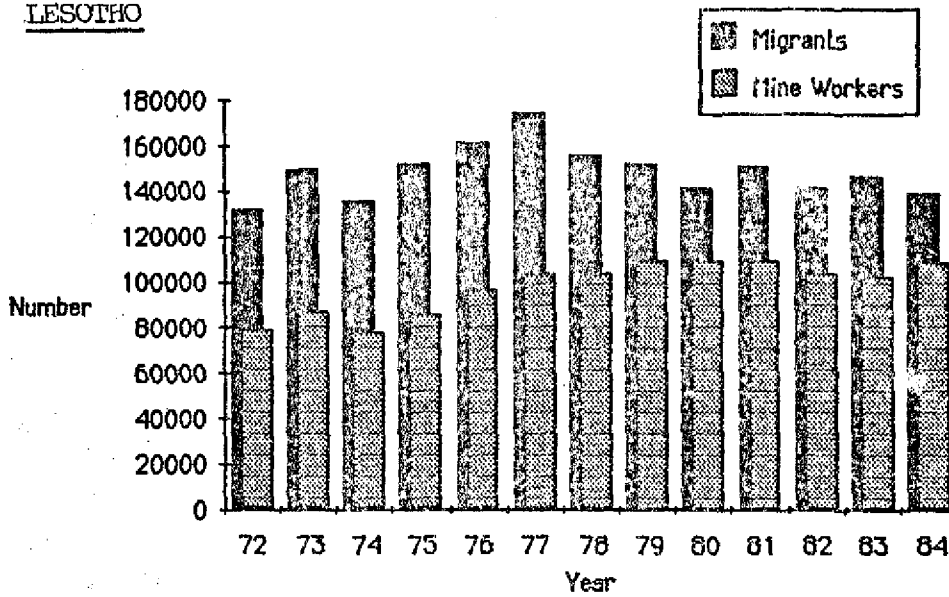


The following two pages illustrate in bar-chart form the fluctuations in migratory labour employed in South Africa since 1972, with mine labour as a proportion of the whole.

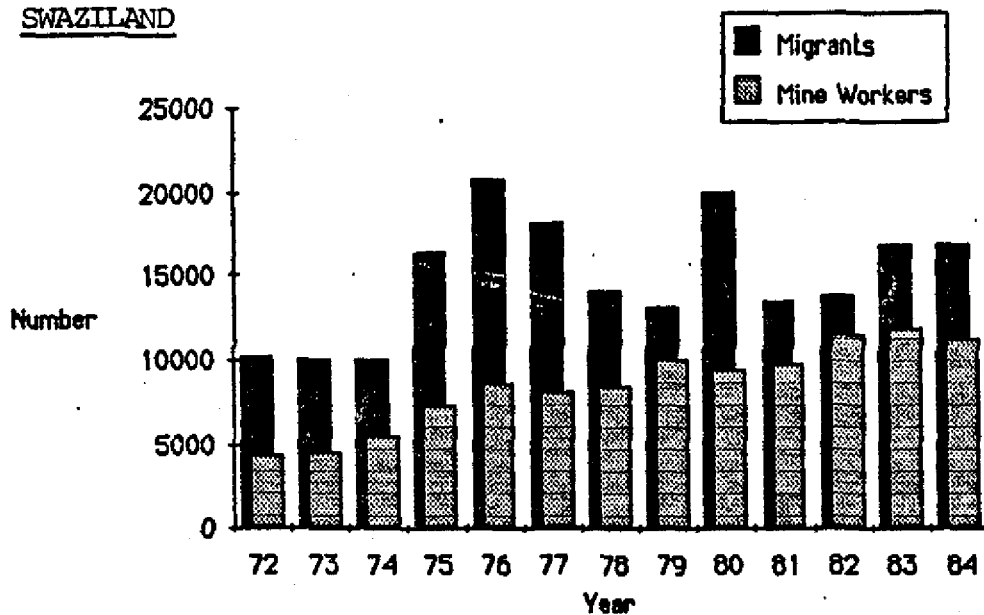
BOTSWANA



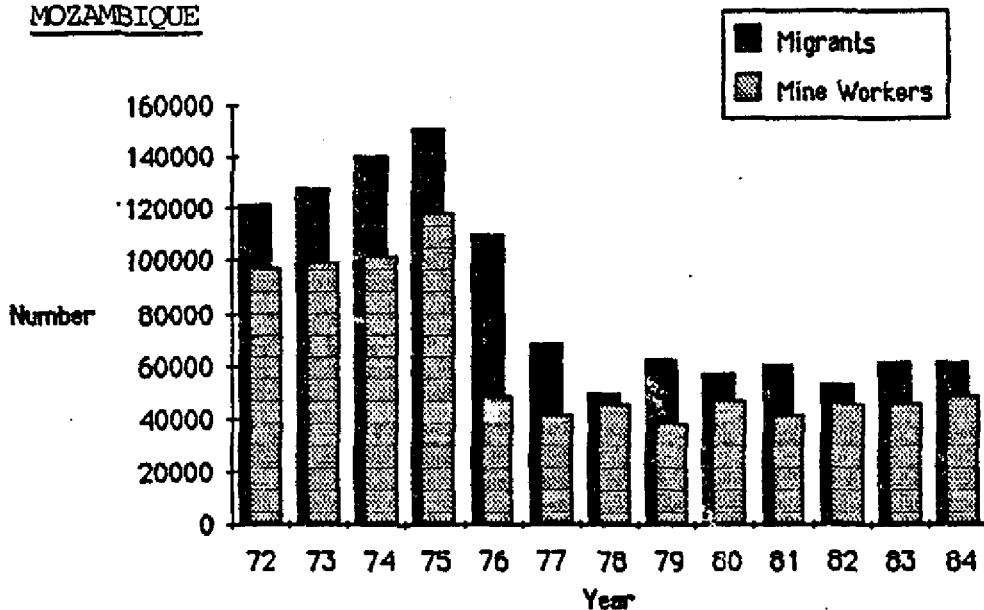
LESOTHO



SWAZILAND



MOZAMBIQUE



MALAWI

