ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES

Extreme events driving people from their homes

A recently completed research project by the CSIR and co-sponsored by the Water Research Commission (WRC) has highlighted the plight of Southern Africa's environmental refugees. It is the first time that such a project has been completed in the region. Sue Matthews reports.

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A little over 20 years ago, on 1 March 2000, Rosita Mabuiango was born in a tree in southern Mozambique as floodwaters from the Limpopo River swirled below. The story made headlines around the world and highlighted the human element of the devastating floods, during which some 800 lives were lost and more than 100 000 people displaced. It helped open hearts and minds to the people's plight, and foreign aid and donor funding poured in for humanitarian assistance. Mozambique was able to establish resettlement camps and subsequently work-for-assistance programmes to encourage people to relocate to areas further away from floodplains.

In 2013, the region experienced severe flooding again, and the impact in Gaza Province exceeded that of the earlier floods, with 150 000 people temporarily displaced. Apart from significant damage to homes, schools, shops and health centres, infrastructure such as roads, electricity networks and drainage systems was affected, disrupting service delivery and the ability of people to resume normal life once the floodwaters had subsided. Those relying on agriculture to sustain their livelihoods had lost livestock and crops in the floods, so relocating to the resettlement camps – upgraded after the 2013 floods – was seen by many as a sensible choice. Some of the inhabitants now commute between the camps and their former lands to practice subsistence agriculture, while others depend entirely on government grants and NGO-facilitated aid.

Should these people be considered environmental refugees, or migrants? And what about the thousands of Zimbabweans who have crossed into South Africa, partly in response to El

Niño-induced drought? Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of extreme events such as floods and droughts, and the World Bank predicts there will be 0.9–1.5 million internal displacements linked to climate change by 2050. Clearly, getting a better understanding of the drivers and impacts of environmental displacement and migration is important.

This was the motivation for a three-year project, called 'Kukimbia – the impact of environmental refugees in Southern Africa', which was conducted by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and co-funded by the Water Research Commission. Kukimbia is the Swahili word for 'run', referring to the need to flee from an environmental disaster or threat, and the project team used the Mozambique and Zimbabwe examples as case studies. More specifically, the 'Gaza Province case study' dealt with internal displacement and planned relocation within Mozambique in response to flooding – a rapid-onset event – while the 'Limpopo case study' in the Musina area addressed cross-border migration into South Africa, linked to slow-onset events, primarily drought.

Data collection for the project relied mainly on surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. In their Final Report, the researchers used the case studies to discuss why people move and whether they can be classified as environmental migrants, to investigate the adaptive capacity of interview respondents in their new location, and to consider the impacts of the migrants on the areas to which they have moved.

The project team used the term 'migrants' rather than 'refugees' in the report, because the latter term is reserved for people who are 'unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion', according to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

In the Limpopo case study, some survey respondents indicated that they did see themselves as refugees rather than environmental or other types of migrants. This was particularly the case for respondents from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Burundi, who said they had left their home countries because of political tensions and violence there that made them fear for their lives. By contrast, respondents from Zimbabwe mostly came to South Africa in search of employment opportunities, and did not consider themselves refugees. Some respondents indicated that environmental conditions strongly affected their decision to migrate to South Africa. This is because drought conditions in 2015/16 had exacerbated food shortages in their home country, where almost three-quarters of the population survives on less than US$1.25 per day.

"There was a drought – we had no rainfall for a very long time and could not grow crops, and we could not feed our families," said one. "Regardless of the drought, I would have moved to South Africa because there are no jobs back in Zimbabwe, and I wanted my kids to go to school."

Another said that even once the drought had broken, the

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Experts are expecting increasing displacements of people due to extreme events linked to climate change.

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An abandoned village in Gaza Province, Mozambique, following the floods in 2013.

economic and political situation was too dire to make them want to stay in Zimbabwe. "When we do receive rainfall, harvest is plenty, but how can we sell our harvest when people have no money … Politics is a huge problem."

The project team emphasise that – given South Africa's attractiveness to people from elsewhere in Africa – the country is unlikely to be able to implement a strictly enforced 'keep out' policy successfully. One reason is the relative ease with which people can cross the border illegally from Zimbabwe, by walking across the dry riverbed of the Limpopo River in the winter months and clambering over the broken-down border fence.

"The government's intentions to document and regularise international migrants already in South Africa is probably a step in the right direction," says project leader, Nikki Funke from the CSIR. "This can be supported by various initiatives, such as strengthening and improving upon existing formalised labour exchange programmes outside of the normal general work permit procedures. An example is the current Zimbabwean Exemption Permit, which legalises Zimbabweans living, working and studying in South Africa."

In the Gaza Province case study, almost 70% of survey respondents had been affected by severe flooding in 2000 and/or 2013. Most of those interviewed in Chinhacanine resettlement camp said that they preferred to stay in the area rather than return to their place of origin. This was partly because government had provided infrastructure and services at the camp, such as schools and water supplies, whereas the respondents had previously collected water from ditches near their homes, and their children had to travel to secondary schools 30–40 km away, resulting in a high drop-out rate. But it was also simply because they understood the risks of returning to the floodplain.

"We lost our belongings. We lost them twice, in 2000 and in 2013," said one. "We will not want to experience this three times. We will not return."

Another said, "We are no longer willing to live there. Because we have had enough of rain and floods. We are tired of water. We don't want to be worried about any kind of rain. In the past once it rained we got worried that our houses would get flooded."

However, at the Chiaquelane resettlement camp in Chokwe district, many people had returned to live in low-lying, flood-prone areas near Chokwe town. The reasons included wanting to resume their farming activities or to be closer to the services and opportunities available in the town. And as mentioned previously, some people are commuting between the camp and the more fertile agricultural land in the floodplain.

"While the Mozambican government has expressed a concern about people returning to their areas of origin, it should perhaps try to embrace such movements and develop ways of enabling people to benefit from both their areas of origin and the safe havens to which they have been resettled, for example through secure tenure of both parcels of land," says Funke. "An alternative may be to further develop the resettlement areas, by providing more economic opportunities, amenities and services, in order to make them more attractive to stay in."

Apart from writing up the research in a technical Final Report, titled 'Environmental migrants – the forgotten refugees affected by slow-onset and rapid-onset events in two case study areas in the Limpopo River Basin, Southern Africa', the CSIR team produced a video about the project, which is available on the WRC's YouTube channel.

In addition, having investigated the policy landscape and the preparedness of the South African and Mozambican governments to respond to future internal and cross-border displacements as a result of environmental disasters, the project team developed three sets of policy guidelines – one directed at each of the countries' governments and the third for SADC decision-makers.

The project team's documentary Environmental Migrants: The forgotten refugees can be found on the WRC's YouTube channel, or at the link below: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSONXA2yB5I

In the South African guideline, the authors point out that our country is obligated to provide humanitarian assistance in cases of emergency to the six neighbouring countries with which it shares borders. Its disaster management structures are designed to respond to rapid-onset events like floods and storms, but it is far harder to assist with slow-onset disasters such as drought, and manage the associated migration into South Africa. Both the White Paper on International Migration and the 2011 National Climate Change Response White Paper make reference to environmental migration, providing some legal framework to address the issue.

The policy guideline therefore includes the following recommendations for improved management of this migration.

- *Make migration one of several possible adaptation options*
  Building the adaptive capacity of rural communities by, for example, providing financial support and expertise to adapt agricultural practices to the effects of changing climate, could help reduce the number of people migrating to urban areas in search of better opportunities.

- *Adopt shared responsibility for cross-border environmental displacement and migration at the bilateral, regional and international level*
  South Africa should not have to bear sole responsibility for taking care of migrants who enter the country as a result of environmental and other factors. The African Union (AU) and its regional communities, in consultation with global migration governance bodies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), need to collectively develop a coherent and systematic approach based on the AU's Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018–2030).

- *Prevent and mitigate environmental displacements and migration of individuals living in areas of risk*
  Human mobility aspects need to be integrated into South Africa's disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation policies and strategies

- *Address the need for rigorous and robust research on the extent and impacts of migration in South Africa*
  Conflicting data on the number of international migrants residing in South Africa makes it impossible to determine their true impact on the economy and on local services and systems, let alone plan for and address such impacts.

In the policy guideline as well as the technical report, the project team conclude by noting that a better understanding of the impacts – both positive and negative – of international migrants could help avert xenophobic attacks in South Africa, given that these are typically fuelled by rumours and emotional reactions.

- Funke N, Jacobs-Mata I, K Nortje K, Nohayi N, Raimundo I, Meissner R, Kgaphola J, Mngadi T and Moyo E, 2020. ***Environmental migrants – the forgotten refugees affected by slow-onset and rapid-onset events in two case study areas in the Limpopo River Basin, Southern Africa***. Water Research Commission, Pretoria (in print)

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Makeshift shelter at Chiqakalane Cam, Mozambique, following floods in 2013.