The Dynamics of Labour Migration from Northern Malawi to South Africa since 1974

By

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Abstract

This study centrally argues that despite the numerous challenges that Malawian migrants face in South Africa, especially in the post-1990 period, a majority of them are able to improve their households and communities in Malawi using proceeds from their wage employment in South Africa. International labour migration from Malawi to South Africa dates back to the late nineteenth century. However, previous scholars have focused on the period up to the 1970s and 1980s when labour migration was both formal and informal. This comprehensive study plays a complementary and supplementary role by focusing on the nature of informal migration from the 1970s onwards where academic research in Malawi is still in its infancy. The study employed a critical analysis of secondary and archival sources and rich oral testimonies. In this regard, through a large expanse of interviews involving male and female migrants and former *Wenela*, *Theba* and *selufu* migrants in Mzimba and Nkhata-Bay districts in northern Malawi and also in Gauteng Province in South Africa, the study unveils the dynamics (nature, dimensions and patterns) of migration from northern Malawi to South Africa. Through this approach, the study allows the migrants to tell their own stories and experiences. The study makes a contribution to the social and cultural historiography of Malawi and South Africa.

The study shows that the decline in mine migrancy in the 1970s and 1980s was merely a culmination of the developments favouring this decline which existed since the 1960s, especially following Malawi's attainment of independence in 1964. The study argues that the increase in informal migration was not only as a result of the decline in mine migrancy in question, but also the changes in the political and socio-economic environments of Malawi, South Africa and the entire SADC region. The thesis also argues that despite government restrictions on migration some women managed to emigrate to South Africa during the pre-1990 period. During this period, most of these women largely accompanied their migrant husbands as house wives. During the post-1990

period, the study shows, women emigrate both as migrants accompanying husbands and as autonomous migrants. They also migrate for various reasons including wage employment and commercial purposes. It also argues that women are active financial agents and builders of social capital like their male counterparts.

The study highlights challenges that male and female migrants faced in South Africa. These challenges include xenophobia, lack of jobs, expensive accommodation, high crime rate, and arrests and deportations due to lack of valid visas and work permits. The study also observed that many of the migrants devised such strategies as getting relief and support from welfare societies and churches of Malawi origin in order to overcome these challenges. In addition, some migrants resorted to the use of *mankhwala gha chifipa* (local medicine) as *mankhwala gha mwabi* (luck medicine) and protection medicine. Through these measures, migrants elongate their stay in South Africa with a view to maximise their proceeds in order for them to ably achieve their set migration goals.

The study has used the human agency perspective, to show that labour migrants are purposive and rational decision-makers. For instance, in the face of the challenges that they face in South Africa, they are able to change from being career migrants to target migrants. Through this, they have managed to maximise their savings, stay briefly in South Africa, and thereafter return home. The study also attempted to assess the developmental impact of remittances in the source areas. There is efficient flow of remittances in the form of *ndalama* (money) and *katundu* (goods) as a result of the improvement in technology, for instance, through the introduction of *mabyuro* (local money bureaux), the online banking system which ensures swift money transfers, local transporters, and special inter-country money transfer facilities in southern Africa, for example, *Mukuru*.