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Immigration practitioners, brokers, agents: investigating the immigration industry in South Africa

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Abstract

Most research in the field of migration studies focuses on providing either a sociology of migrants or a political analysis of the regulations which govern immigration. In this research project I have taken a different, structural approach to the field by studying the immigration industry in South Africa through the lens provided by immigration intermediaries.

This research examines who immigration intermediaries are; the role they play in and around immigration structures; and the relationship between the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), immigration intermediaries, and immigrants. By using data collected in 16 qualitative, in-depth interviews with actors in the industry, primarily immigration practitioners, the primary aim of this research is to document and analyse the role of immigration intermediaries within the South African immigration industry and the role they have in shaping emerging structures around immigration.

With intermediaries as the focus of enquiry, this research has three primary results: the first is a typology of immigration intermediaries; the second is an analysis of the relationship between the DHA and intermediaries which understands the role played by intermediaries as essentially a function that the DHA has outsourced as a result of their inability to effectively manage migration; and the third is an argument that South Africa's immigration regulations have always, and continue to, ensure the reproduction of a precarious migrant class to the benefit of the South African economy.

Research in migration studies tends to focus on either migrants or immigration policy. This research focuses instead on neglected actors and structures, the intermediaries and the institutions they operate within, and brings to the attention of the field the importance of the actors and structures that facilitate immigration in South Africa.