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The impact of legal status on national identity formation: A case study of former Mozambican refugees living in Bushbuckridge, South Africa

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Abstract

This research report examines the relationship between legal status and national identity formation. It is based on a qualitative research of former refugees from Mozambique who have lived and settled in the Northern Province of South Africa now called Limpopo province in the border areas with Mozambique for over twenty years. The report compares the narratives of former Mozambican refugees in South Africa who have acquired permanent residence and citizenship with those that are undocumented. The distinction between undocumented and documented former refugees allows me to look at the role of access to services in identity formation, since most government services in South Africa, as elsewhere, are not accessible without legal documentation. Since most services are, however, accessible for both permanent residents and citizens, the distinction between these two statuses allow me to explore whether there is a more symbolic meaning attached to citizenship. Drawing from citizenship theory, variations in the attachment to South Africa or Mozambique that emerged in the research data are analysed in terms of the refugees' experience of social inclusion or social exclusion norms. The benefits of social inclusion and how it shapes positive attitudes towards attaching to South Africa is discussed.