

# Retrenchments' effects

**T**he downsizing of the South African gold mining industry and the on-going retrenchments of thousands of mineworkers has implications for many sectors of South African society. This briefing focuses on the informal settlements scattered throughout mining areas in the Free State that exist primarily to service mineworkers.

Many of these informal settlements are situated in isolated areas on white-owned farms next to mines. Tenants either pay rent directly to the farmer, or to the groups of resident men who administer the settlements.

The Marashea or 'Russians' control a large number of these squatter camps. Farmers allow the Marashea to establish settlements on their land in return for rent and/or a percentage of the proceeds from liquor sales. The Marashea is a predominately Basotho association that has existed in mining areas for more than 50 years.

The Marashea support themselves in a number of ways, including criminal pursuits like extortion, robbery and assassination. They also rely heavily on funds they generate from catering to mineworkers. Residents usually pay rent and pay 'protection' fees to the Marashea. In return the Marashea, who are greatly feared, settle disputes within the community and ensure that visiting mineworkers pay members of the

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community for services. Visitors (and residents) who do not obey Marashea regulations are fined, beaten or both.

Squatter camps are characterised by terrible living conditions. Most have no access to clean water, no sanitation facilities, no rubbish disposal and no electricity. The majority of dwellings are shacks constructed of corrugated tin and wood. The camps' geographical isolation, combined with the inhabitants' poverty, means that access to health care is limited and many children do not attend school.

Women tend to outnumber men in the squatter camps in the Free State. Most women are migrants, from Lesotho or the former homelands. Desperate economic (and sometimes social) circumstances in these women's home areas often force them to go to the camps. They travel to these camps and resort to selling sex to mineworkers. Residents, male and female, also support themselves through selling liquor or acting as shacklords by subletting, mainly to unattached women.

These enterprises form the economic backbone of the squatter communities. Ultimately, the residents of the squatter community settlements rely either directly or indirectly on money from the mineworkers.

Life in the settlements is marked by extremely high levels of alcohol abuse and violence. Different Marashea groups sometimes compete for control of the camps. This competition usually results in episodes of violent conflict. Female residents in particular lead an unsafe existence as they are subject to abuse by male customers, Marashea members inflicting harsh physical punishments for not obeying group rules, and even white farmers. In one settlement, when unattached women do not pay their rent, the farmer has been known to take them to the mine hostel and 'sell' them to any man who will pay the rent that the women owe. Sexually transmitted diseases are widespread and studies show that the majority of sex workers in informal mining settlements are HIV positive.

The downsizing of the mining industry has had many consequences for squatter communities - all of which have been negative. The Marashea gangs that control the camps are feeling the squeeze.

Most Marashea who live in the camps are unemployed and are financially dependent on liquor sales, protection fees levied from residents, membership fees paid by mineworkers who belong to the group (primarily to gain free access to women), and funds from mineworkers who house female companions in the settlement.

In many camps, these sources of funding are decreasing due to retrenchments. Additionally, the Marashea used to replenish their forces with novice mineworkers newly arrived from Lesotho. Young men still come because they have no way of supporting themselves in Lesotho, but now they come straight to the camps, and have nothing to offer economically.

These developments will probably force some Marashea groups to engage in

increased criminal activities. Furthermore, the incidence of conflict between different Marashea groups may well rise as the gangs fight over decreasing resources.

A decrease in the number of paying customers also increases competition between desperate sex workers. This environment results in squabbling, witchcraft accusations and heightened levels of violence. Sex workers who are forced to compete for customers are less likely to insist that their clients use condoms, thereby increasing the likelihood of HIV infection. A reduction in earnings also puts women at greater risk of eviction and physical abuse if they are unable to meet their financial obligations.

Because migrant mineworkers face such bleak economic circumstances if they return to their home areas, many choose to settle in the squatter camps when they are retrenched. This results in some cash flowing into the squatter camps' community when the ex-mineworkers spend their retrenchment packages. However, studies show that most of this money is used for day-to-day survival rather than being invested productively.<sup>1</sup>

The population of many camps is increasing, due to retrenched mineworkers settling in them and continuing migration from Lesotho and the former homelands. This is happening at a time when the squatter camps are becoming less economically viable. The decline in the gold mining industry is also having a disastrous effect on many related enterprises such as taxi businesses and spaza shops. ★

### Footnote

1. Seldman, G. 'Sbafled. The social impact of down-scaling in the OFS goldfields', In J. Crusb and W. James (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Mine Migrancy In a Democratic South Africa* (Cape Town, 1995)