

Waai-waai

the impact of retrenchment

When modern industry developed in South Africa, colonisers and capitalists, with the help of the state, implemented strategies to 'force' labour from what they saw as the unproductive economy (the rural sector) into mines, factories and commercial farms. Strategies included the poll tax, hut tax, labour tax as well as people being removed from 'white designated areas' to governmentally defined homelands.

Young men were siphoned from the rural areas to the mines. Here, they were paid low wages - just enough for them to come to work the next day and send some money home to their families. With the preoccupation to pay taxes, dependency on wage labour was instilled in the minds of rural people. The talk in many villages at the peak of migrant labour was that *uzakuyi thatha nini ijoyina mfana?* (When are you going to take the mine work contract young man?)

This forced dependency on wage labour became an entrenched way of life for many poor homesteads, particularly in the wake of unprecedented droughts, a series of plagues and vicious cattle diseases.

Mining capital's demand for labour began to change in the 1980s. According to the Southern Africa Migration Project (1999) gold mines affiliated to the Chamber of Mines employed about

Xolani Ngonini went to villages in rural areas in the Eastern Cape and spoke to retrenched mineworkers and their families about the difficulties they face.

500 000 workers in 1987, but by 1997 this figure had dropped to 300 000 and fell to 240 000 in 1998. At the same time that the demand for migrant labour decreased, people living in rural areas had an increased need for money because of poor agricultural yields and decimated herds.

Waai-waai

Waai-waai (go-go in Afrikaans) is the concept used by the migrants to refer to the spate of retrenchments. It tells a story about the employer-employee relationship and how the lay-offs are dealt with. From the migrant's point of view, it means they were not properly consulted and not provided with training so as to find another job.

In a document entitled 'A Vision for the Mining Industry', the NUM (1998) expresses the future prospects of the migrants: 'Migrant workers have little or no chance of finding alternative employment and are forced to return to their

communities. With little economic opportunities, infrastructures in disarray and eroded agricultural assets, retrenched workers have limited prospects of escaping the poverty cycle.'

My research involved going to three villages in the Bizana district and interviewing retrenched mineworkers and their families to determine how they were affected by the retrenchments in the mining industry

The villages

Bizana district is situated in Eastern Pondoland, which is known as Qawukeni under the traditional authority of the Sigcau lineage. It is along the South Coast bordering on the Indian Ocean. The three villages reflect patterns of dependency, as in almost every homestead one or two members have been migrants at some stage. Many people are still working as migrants on the mines, and their remittances are the primary source of income for their households.

These villages escaped the betterment plans (villagisation) of apartheid and are thus widely spaced. By the same token, it could be said that they have been escaped by development projects. To mention a few things they have missed out on: electricity, 'RDP' houses, road construction and government provided sanitation. For all these villages there is no efficient transport since the Transkei Road Transport Corporation (TRTC) was shut down with the dissolution of homeland governments. The nearest hospital is about 30 to 40 kilometres away from these villages. Water is sourced from remote rivers, where washing is also done. There is one high school and one primary school, but no preschool.

These villages have 340 homesteads, and more pensioners than full-time workers. There are no jobs except in the

informal sector composed of cafes, panel beating and building services.

Of the 340 homesteads, 150 do not have anyone who is currently employed. About 90 homesteads have members working as street vendors in Durban or as domestic workers. The other homesteads have pensioners as breadwinners.

Extended families are a norm in these villages. The biggest extended family has 26 sons and daughters as well as 28 grandchildren. This homestead has about 20 huts. The smallest homestead has five people. With the spate of retrenchments from the mines, there is a very high number of males in these villages - more than ever before.

Loss of dignity

Previously, when a young man from the village found a job on the mines the entire village would be jubilant, because migrant work was deemed a prized job. Indeed, society cares for an individual when that individual is profitable. However, members of the community regard some of the ex-migrants who have returned home to be crazy or mad because of depression.

These ex-miners report being highly frustrated because with the loss of their jobs came a loss of dignity and status in the homestead. 'Since I lost my job, I do not have the respect I used to command when I was working. Then, when I came back, I used to buy people beers, drinks, blankets for old people, sweets for children, but now I cannot afford to buy myself even a loose fag.'

These are traditional patriarchal villages. However, the crisis in the mining and migrant labour system has shaken the foundation upon which patriarchy was based - men as the sole breadwinners and wives staying at home and engaging in agriculture for their own food needs. Many of the retrenched migrants are no longer



Retrenched miners returning to rural areas face a bleak future.

able to bring in a cash wage. They report that they are always stressed and depressed as a result of the retrenchment and their inability to find work again. Many report that they were not given counselling when they were retrenched, and think that this worsened their situation. They constantly ask: 'What am I going to do? How am I going to make a living? I do not know how to do anything else!' The men feel that they are unable to use the skills they learned on the mines. 'I have the drilling and blasting certificate, but I can not use these things here. I can be a security at the gate with my knobkerrie.'

Those who bought goats, sheep and cattle have had to sell their livestock to educate their children. They state that they are no longer regarded as important people since their herds have decreased and in these villages, a person who has more livestock is more important than a

person who has a car. Cattle ownership holds high status since cattle are used for occasions such as weddings and burials.

The negative perception of migrants is reinforced at home where some men are regarded as superfluous and burdensome. One man captured this sentiment in saying: 'My wife once told me that things were easier for her while I was away and now things have become more complex since I am here at home doing nothing (umahlalela – the unemployed). She says I am only a burden, and in fact I am just like one of the children she has to feed. I felt so bad, because what she was saying was true.'

Many men are devastated when their wives leave them. One lady explained why she was leaving: 'If he can't provide food and money for us I don't know why I have to stay with him because he is never going to get a job here. The only thing I see yindlala (hunger, poverty).'

Women

The retrenchments and changed accumulation strategies have affected the ways in which household power and authority are exercised within the homestead. Under the peak of the migrant labour system, the members of the families in the villages were involved in agriculture. It was regarded as good to have many children who could help in agricultural activities. With a decline in the ability of the land to support families and having no income from waged labour on the mines, many women sought new ways of making money and/or surviving. One of the respondents explained 'I wake up very early in the morning, around 4.00 to work in the garden in summer, and thereafter without even taking a break, I go to ask nurses or teachers if they have any laundry that needs to be done. I do this for my children because their father was retrenched.'

Many, relatively young women have decided to either leave their husbands and go back to their original homesteads or migrate to KwaZulu-Natal. The women who migrate to Durban often work as fruit street vendors if they failed to get a job in manufacturing factories or as domestic workers from the middle/higher class residents around. However, their husbands complain that they do not come back with money, rather some come back pregnant and not wanting to stay with them any more: 'My wife left for Durban in 1997, she told me that her friend had found her a job. She only came back in 1999 pregnant and to fetch the kids from me. This devastated me very much. I can not sleep properly since they left because I do not know what is happening to my children.'

Hardship for families

Lack of resources and income has destabilised many families. For many

families it is even difficult to get food onto the table. As the old Xhosa saying goes 'the cat's sleeping on the hearth' - meaning cooking does not take place because there is nothing to cook!

Families also experience extreme stress over their children's schooling. Over the past few years the cost of living has increased dramatically - for example school fees have gone up and school uniforms have become expensive. One respondent pointed out that if 'your kids don't have the uniform on, then they can't be in the classroom.' Sadly, this happens at a time when these parents have realised the increased need for education in order to secure a job.

A large number of school-going children have been withdrawn from school because parents cannot afford to pay the fees. Some students who have completed grade twelve are unable to study further because of a lack of funds. One frustrated pupil stated that: 'If these unsympathetic mine owners had not laid off my father I would be doing mechanical engineering at a university now. When we go to the bank, they ask for pay slip yet, my father does not work and thus I do not qualify for a loan.'

Entrepreneurial skills

Some migrants have engaged in entrepreneurial activities to generate an income. The results have been varied.

Shops

Some migrants opened general dealer shops, cafés and so forth. However, many of those who opened shops have since failed and have gone into debt with the local wholesalers.

One migrant who was running a café said he was in hiding because he owed the local wholesale manager some money from the previous stock he loaned from him.



Thousands have been retrenched in the mining industry.

Tractors

Two ex-migrants suffered strokes while they were still employed and were thus compelled, for health reasons, to stop working and come back to live with their families. Upon 'retiring' they were given packages, which they used to purchase tractors. These tractors earned them some money initially. However, since they lacked business acumen and faced depressed conditions they did not make profits. One of them stated that, 'When I came back I bought a red tractor from Kokstad, and initially I made money, but as time went by I did not see where it was going. People started not paying on time or not paying at all. They told me that their husbands or sons have not sent money.'

Mechanic

Mr Kola's story is more positive. He had worked as a mechanic on a mine for 15 years and now he uses the skills he acquired

there to fix the old cars in the village. 'I fix the skoro-koros. They bring a few rands to buy food and pay fees for my children. This is the only source of income for me.'

However, he still faces difficulties. When asked why he does not open a garage in his home, he said 'Many mechanics have been killed, because people bring cars while they don't have money to pay for them. They then send their friends to come and borrow some parts of the car or else they come late to strip some parts so that when they come in the morning to fetch the car some things are missing. You as a mechanic you have to pay for the missing part and they will not pay for what you have fixed.'

Dagga

The 'wonderful weed' has come as a major source of income for a number of homesteads, such that they manage to raise more than R300 a month if the police

do not to ransack their homesteads. The weather is generally favourable to its germination, and is quite easy and very cheap to grow. As those who grow it say 'All you need to do is plant and then not forget when and where you planted it!'

Networks

Another survival strategy used by the families is linking in to networks or community associations. Food associations (*imihlanganiso*) have mushroomed over the last few years, as buffers against poverty and developing community self-provision. But, money is needed to belong to the food associations and interest is charged to those who do not pay on time. One migrant stated that it took his homestead almost six months to get R30 for the association. Later they had to pay R100 towards the association and when they could not pay it they were expelled.

Families without these resources rely on what they call *ukunkinkqa* (going to ask for mealie meal, sugar, and tea, stamp (*umgqusho*) almost everything!). Homesteads, which embark on *ukunkinkqa*, have less material assets such as livestock, education and skills and do not earn an income.

In most of these homesteads, wives have begun to use multiple relationships as a way to get money from those who are working. As one woman explains: 'My husband does not work, and I cannot find a job in town, besides it's too far. I have decided to date a *joyini* (a miner) because he is still working and gives me money, which I use to buy basic things for the homestead.'

Crime

Gun shots, stabbings and fights in the drinking areas were not part of every day life before, but it has become a norm. According to the headman who is an ex-

migrant this is because 'there are too many men present in the village, not working, frustrated'. He also stated that he has to deal with more conflicts between individuals as well as villages than ever before. Most of these conflicts are a result of theft and robbery, which has flourished over the years. People go to other villages to steal. Faction fights have become endemic and increase tensions when they result in the death of an innocent person. The violence is also fuelled by alcohol.

Migrants state that they are driven to crime to survive. For example, one migrant said that his wife told him that she was going to leave if he did not do something about poverty. He emphatically said that: 'You know! *Indlala inamanyala* (Hunger breeds evil). I never thought that I could steal anything, but now I am forced by circumstances. I cannot find a job, children need to eat, I decided to steal. I have stolen three goats and one pig. I slaughter them and take them to town, because if I keep them I will be caught.'

This migrant said he had been doing this with his three daughters who have withdrawn from school and are saving money to go to Durban to look for employment.

Conclusion

While there is still much more that the miners had to say, this short article points to the devastating effects of retrenchments in the mining industry. The effects include not only deepening poverty, but also the breakdown of family life and the erosion of people's dignity. It is ironic that those who built the mining industry now pay the price for its decline. ★

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