

# Zimbabwe-South African border

## Soccer, braais and community of workers

Many South Africans have the image of desperate Zimbabweans hacking their way through wire to enter the South African world of plenty. **Maxim Bolt** shows that this is a stereotype of what is in reality a more stable community of workers.

**D**riving along the service road on the South African side of the border with Zimbabwe, you trace the line of the border fence. At first glance it is formidable. Yet the fencing, pyramids of razor wire and formerly high voltage lines are scarred by their inefficacy. Ceramic parts which once supported electric cabling lie strewn in the dirt. In places the fence has been cut so often it appears as a patchwork of repairs. On the opposite side of the road, stretches of bush suggest a wild isolation.

This rather superficial account would be consistent with the usual stereotyped images of the border area, and of Zimbabweans' experiences there. A spate of media reports in 2007 focused international attention on supposedly remote, game-farm territory, populated by Zimbabwean border-jumpers running through the bush, 'vigilante' farmers in hot pursuit.

Zimbabweans in the border area are often portrayed through two images, sometimes in combination. They are 'border jumpers', fugitives and perhaps already on the road to dangerous criminal activity; or they are victims, downtrodden, targets of

abuse and potential humanitarian intervention. In truth, matters are more complex.

The border is the site of several large, white-owned crop farms. Zimbabweans on border farms find themselves in a wide range of positions and their experiences of the area differ. What follows draws on data I gathered during research in 2006 to 2008 on one farm, Grootplaas (not its real name). The research explored the more general border area and followed Grootplaas residents in their activities and personal connections. The dire circumstances under which many Zimbabweans find themselves should not be downplayed. However, I aim to frame experiences of those on the border in a more nuanced way.

What does a new Zimbabwean arrival to the area find? How can seasonal workers at Grootplaas become integrated in farm worker populations? Focusing on football teams shows how new male arrivals establish themselves in important networks. And this shows the diversity of Zimbabweans' experiences in the area, and the inadequacy of the common stereotypes mentioned above.

### MOBILITY, SETTLEMENT AND COMMUNITY

What do new arrivals find having crossed the border? A place shaped by fluidity, resulting from Zimbabwean displacement but also of stability, of well-rooted permanent workforces and networks within and between the farms. And they experience the geographical isolation of the area.

Grootplaas employs large numbers of mostly Zimbabwean permanent workers. The border farms, some very large, have created permanent-worker populations living in clearly demarcated, but unfenced, compounds.

Many come from nearby across the border and negotiate with South African soldiers to cross regularly. Other permanent employees come from further afield in Zimbabwe and visit home rarely.

Many have relatives in South Africa on local farms, elsewhere in the area or in cities to the south. Earnings in rands are now crucial for many Zimbabwean families. So the working population at Grootplaas is connected both to home areas in Zimbabwe and to a wide variety of other places in South Africa.

Grootplaas' permanent workforce



is often visited by spouses or relatives. Indeed, a population of both Zimbabweans and South Africans live in the compound as dependents or business people, with varying degrees of permanence.

Zimbabwean residents, at Grootplaas and on other farms, vary enormously in their goals, patterns of movement and settlement, and the extent of their local influence. And, reflecting widespread displacement in Zimbabwe, there is also great variation in regional, class and ethnic backgrounds. The most powerful among Grootplaas' black population, however, remain largely Venda men from the rural border area.

In spite of this diversity, the border farming area, surrounded by game farms and far from the closest town, has considerable coherence as a community. The Grootplaas population is bound together through kinship, friendship and sexual relationships.

Such connections also tie the farms in the area together. Many of the crop farms are close enough to

one another to allow regular movement between them on weekends. Widespread inter-farm socialisation is intensified through events such as weekly football tournaments.

During the harvest, Grootplaas employs hundreds of Zimbabweans to pick and pack fruit. Some are the resident spouses or relatives of permanent employees. Others have more diffuse home-based connections to the farm. Others again are on their way south and hear of possible work, or stumble across the farm and try their luck.

Many intend to use the money to pay for transport to big South African cities, attracted by less aggressive policing and possible opportunities. Of these, the luckier have relatives with whom they can stay at their eventual destinations.

Meanwhile, it is not uncommon for Zimbabweans to work the harvest year after year. Returnees to Grootplaas are recruited preferentially. Waiting for the next harvest in April, those who come yearly may tend to their families' crops in Zimbabwe. They may try to make a living from waged odd-

jobs and/or informal economic activities on the border farms. Or they may even find interim jobs elsewhere in South Africa.

Seasonal employees' experiences often contrast sharply with their permanent co-workers. Large numbers of seasonal recruits arrive in the farm area around the same time. Farmers always have difficulties acquiring the necessary work permits for them. These circumstances bring frequent and often aggressive police raids to the compounds to deport 'illegals'.

Seasonal workers are immediately marked out in the Grootplaas compound because most live in a particular section. In 2007, most seasonal workers at Grootplaas never received permits due to bureaucratic complications. The beginning of the harvest saw many sleeping in the bush to avoid night-time raids. Others would be locked in their rooms from the outside by friends, to avoid detection. Informal agreements between farmers, police and the army to ease their situation were only partially and locally effective.

Permanent workers enjoy the stability of secure employment, documentation and established networks. Spouses and relatives employed seasonally are likely to receive permits more quickly than those without such connections. But beyond this, everyone without papers suffer the same vulnerability in the face of the police.

Even first-time arrivals can become integrated into networks, which make life much more liveable. These networks are diverse, and include work teams, churches and for men football teams. I turn now to football, to show how seasonal arrivals become integrated into networks at Grootplaas.

## FOOTBALL: BEYOND THE GAME

A stretch of relatively bare earth, a number of teams in football strips – two on the pitch, the rest on the sidelines and spectators from several different farms, cheering or socialising.

Those from furthest along the border road have come in a large truck originally built to carry cattle. A few men and women sell hard-boiled eggs, quarts of beer from cooler boxes, chicken pieces freshly *braaied* (barbecued). A handful of cars and *bakkies* (pick-up trucks) store more drinks and show the status of their owners or the foremen who have full-time use of farm vehicles. Spectators dance to music blaring from a large speaker.

Weekly football tournaments are an opportunity for socialising and are often well attended, despite the R10 entry fee. But for members, teams have a wider significance.

Grootplaas has two football teams. The Greens are funded by the farm, dominated by permanent employees and play throughout the year.

The Yellows are organised and managed by their founder, Hardship, a senior permanent worker (names of teams and workers are not real names). They are funded by a businessman from Musina and by member contributions. They form only during the harvest each year, and include far more seasonal workers.

Support for teams, however, shows football blurs any division between permanent and seasonal workforces. Employment category is not a reliable predictor of team support. Fans often align themselves with the team they feel plays the best football.

Teams train several times a week, which alleviates everyday boredom. Being a member of a team offers a

way to make life liveable at Grootplaas. Most obviously, team members get to know each other. They benefit from an easy avenue to make friendships beyond their allocated rooms or work environments. And this affiliation lends a degree of belonging to life at Grootplaas.

The end of the 2007 harvest was marked by a *braai* organised by Hardship for the Yellows. Members and affiliates perched on a ring of benches around a fire on which sat a pot of warthog. This was an exclusive event. But it was held in the middle of the compound, outside a *shebeen* run out of a resident's room. The braai underscored members' belonging to a select group at Grootplaas.

The football team gives other benefits. A significant problem for many seasonal workers is where to keep their money safe if they do not know or trust their roommates. Often they seek out permanent workers, who have rooms to themselves, to safeguard their earnings. Football players enjoy close friendships with permanent workers involved in the teams. Hardship and his team's coach both look after considerable seasonal-worker earnings.

Many full-time residents maintain vegetable gardens around the compound. They thereby cut food expenses, and mark their established place in the compound by developing its landscape. Hardship allowed at least one seasonal worker use of his garden. The connection? The seasonal worker was a player on his team.

Connections established through football influence workers' experiences of labour itself. They get to know senior workers. Hardship is a supervisor during the harvest, overseeing fruit-picking groups in the orchards.

Many pickers lessen the monotony of work and maintain work pace through an aggressive, joking camaraderie. But the work experience improves when supervisors join in the banter. As Hardship wandered between picking teams in 2007 as a spare supervisor, he would alternate between jokes and commands with pickers. This allowed others to joke back with him, underscoring their rapport with powerful figures and displaying their belonging in Grootplaas' networks of authority.

And more generally, Hardship controls both seasonal recruiting and the daily register. A good relationship with him can be a means to miss work without being marked absent. And of course it ensures employment for next year.

## CONCLUSION

The border farming community is built around permanent workers. Seasonal recruits can face extreme vulnerability at the farm. But being part of permanent-worker networks allows them to build reasonably comfortable lives.

Membership in Hardship's football team offers opportunities as diverse as the means to make acquaintances; keep earnings safe; grow food and therefore save money; and participate in banter at work.

By showing the enormous diversity of residents' positions on border farms, then by describing how football teams integrate workers into local networks, I hope I have challenged images of Zimbabweans in the border area simply as 'victims' or rootless transients. LB

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