

SECOND CARNEGIE INQUIRY INTO POVERTY
AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Unemployment and casual labour in
Maseru: The impact of changing
employment strategies on migrant
labourers in Lesotho

by

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This paper is based on research carried out by the two members of the Oral History Project of the Institute of Southern African Studies of the National University of Lesotho on the attitudes towards unemployment of men seeking, but unable to obtain, work on the South African mines.¹ While the debate around the attempts to define and quantify the extent of unemployment in South Africa continues, the fact that a vast number of workseekers are unable to obtain employment is not disputed, neither is the fact that this entails unacceptable levels of material distress and personal suffering and creates social instability and retrogressive social consequences. The extent of unemployment amongst Basotho is also difficult to estimate but its existence in Lesotho, and its direct relationship to the situation in South Africa, is obvious. It is also a development of profound significance, for the fact that able-bodied men can no longer assume that they can obtain contracts to work in South Africa is potentially perhaps the most radical change in Lesotho's history since its loss of political independence and incorporation into the South African economy at the end of the nineteenth century. However, while this paper does attempt to place the question of unemployment amongst aspirant workers in the context of recent developments in South Africa and its mining industry, and also presents some recent statistics, it does not concentrate on problems of definition and quantification. Instead we have tried to present an impression of the phenomenon of unemployment as it is perceived by the unemployed: to give some indication of the point of view of men who, while they are often discussed and analysed from the outside as an economic or social problem, are seldom given the opportunity to present their viewpoint, or are listened to as individuals facing fundamental problems of social survival.

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As is well-known, historical developments have created in Lesotho the deepest economic links with South Africa and structures of economic dependency. The outstanding features of this dependency are the extensive participation of Basotho workers in the economy of South Africa as migrant labourers, the steady decline in agricultural production in Lesotho, and the increasing reliance that this has created in Lesotho upon wages earned in South Africa. Consequently the restriction in the jobs available for Basotho on the South African mines since 1976 has confronted many aspirant migrant labourers with the threat of destitution.

For most of its history the South African gold mining industry has relied upon a cheap, plentiful supply of African labour. The mining industry has argued that the fixed price of gold and rising production costs have made substantial wage increases impossible and that it has been forced to rely on a large, formally untrained, migrant - and therefore inexpensive - work force, a significant proportion of which has been drawn from outside the political boundaries of South Africa. The early 1970s however saw changes in the international, and the internal, situation which were to be of the utmost significance to the gold mining industry and the millions of Southern Africans whose lives depend upon it. In 1971 instability in the international monetary system led to the freeing of the gold price and as a result it rose rapidly (with fluctuations) through the decade. Just at this point in time, when it was essential that the gold mining industry take advantage of the enormous increases in the gold price, so the availability of African labour appeared to be threatened. In 1974 labour from Malawi was temporarily withdrawn, Mozambique achieved independence, there was labour unrest amongst Basotho miners, and there was a relaxation (as a result of external pressure) in some of the legal devices used to control contract labour. At the beginning of 1975 the mines were 27% short on their underground labour requirements. (Kane-Berman, 1976)

It is within the context of these developments that the changes in employment strategies have to be situated. There had already been a break with the old 'maximum average' system which precluded competition amongst the mining

houses by fixing wage rates, and mine wages increased rapidly with average underground 'cash earnings' nearly tripling between 1973 and 1976. (Kane-Berman, 1976) Mine wages became for the first time competitive with wages in industry, and as recession and unemployment began to affect the South African work force more deeply so the mining industry was able to successfully shift the focus of its recruiting policy¹ and concentrate on attracting 'internal' labour, as distinct from foreign labour. The success of this policy of 'internalization' is indicated by one estimate which calculated that in 1972, 78% of the African workers on the gold mines were drawn from foreign sources, and that by 1979 this figure had dropped to 46%. (Lipton, 1980)

There was also a move on the part of the mining industry towards a degree of 'stabilization' of the work force by means of a system which gave employment preference to workers whose records indicated that they were experienced and 'reliable', and incentives were provided which encouraged longer contracts on the mines and shorter periods at home. The Chamber of Mines advocated a 'career in mining' (Murray, 1980), the development of skills, visits home within the contract period, thus moving away from the high turnover in labour, and the long but sporadic periods spent at the work place which had been associated with labour migrancy in Southern Africa throughout its history. (Lipton, 1980: Böhning, 1981: Murray, 1981: Spiegel, 1981) Already by 1979 a high official in the Chamber of Mines could say:

... all is not gloom on the labour front. The availability of unskilled labour continues to exceed the industry's requirements and this has had a stabilizing influence on the labour situation. The general recessionary conditions in Southern Africa in the last four years, together with the sharp rise in the wage levels of unskilled workers and the improved welfare services on the mines, have led to considerable competition for the available jobs in the industry. This has enabled the gold producers to attract larger numbers of employees from the South African geographical region itself which now provides more than 50 per cent of the total unskilled labour force compared with about 25 per cent in 1974. Consequently, workers on shorter terms of engagement are tending to extend their stay on the mines and others are returning sooner to the mines after a period of leave. The advantage from the industry's point of view is that far less time is lost in such workers becoming fully productive again than is the case with novice labour. (Main, 1979)

1. Employees at TEBA have informed us that the organisation no longer 'recruits' labour - it now 'considers applications for employment': no matter how revealing this change in phraseology might be old habits die hard and we have retained the older expressions.

As a means of bringing about this 'stabilization' the Valid Re-registration Guarantee Certificate (VRG) was introduced. This document is known to mine-workers as the 'bonus', or the 'checha-buya' (fanakalo for 'come-back-quickly'). Apart from the pink bonus (TEBA 458) which is a leave certificate, there are three types of VRG. The yellow bonus (TEBA 459) for those with special skills, the terms of which are negotiated at the end of a contract between worker and management. The green bonus (TEBA 460) is for workers whose last contract was between 26 and 45 weeks and who are guaranteed re-employment if they return to the mine within two months of the end of their last contract. The blue bonus (TEBA 461) is for workers whose last contract was over 45 weeks, and who receive a rand for each week of this contract if they return within three months, and which expires after six months.

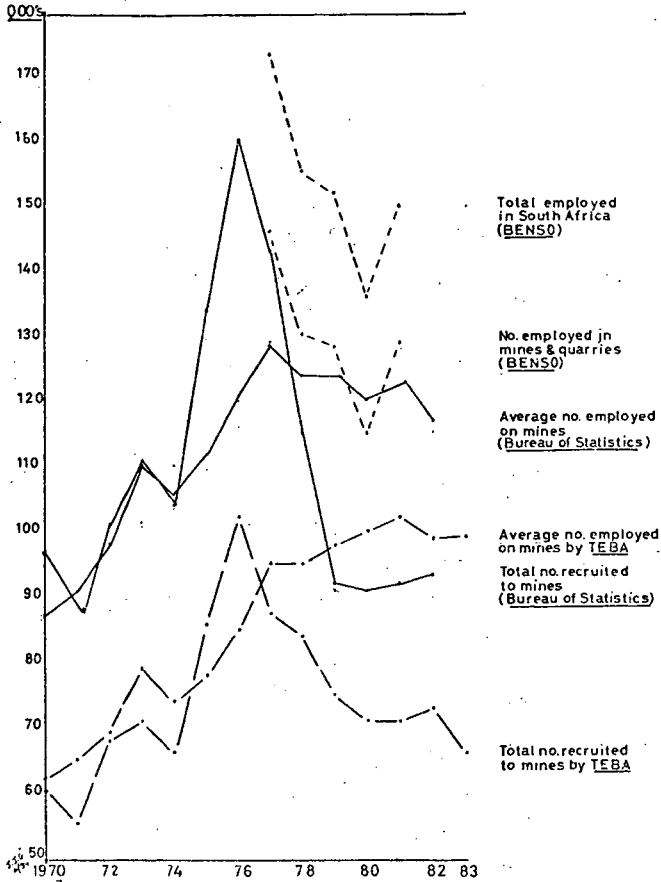
The number of workers from Lesotho to the mines did not follow the general pattern for foreign workers, and did not drop off immediately the policy of 'internalization' was adopted - higher wages and the demand for labour saw the number of Basotho workers increase markedly, reaching a peak in 1976. Thereafter recruiting figures dropped rapidly, levelling off in 1980. These trends are depicted in Figure I. While there are anomalies in the information drawn from three different sources the general trends are compatible.¹

It has been suggested (Murray,1980) that a significant indicator of unemployment is the difference between the figure for the number of workers in employment and the number recruited. From the information given in Figure I this difference can be clearly seen with the number of recruits dropping rapidly below the number in employment in 1977, and which probably indicates an increase in contract lengths and a resultant decrease in the number of individuals obtaining contracts.

1. It should be pointed out that these figures are not compatible with those in Table II in Lipton, 1980 - but this difference cannot be explained until we discover how these figures were calculated.

FIGURE 1

Basotho miners in South Africa

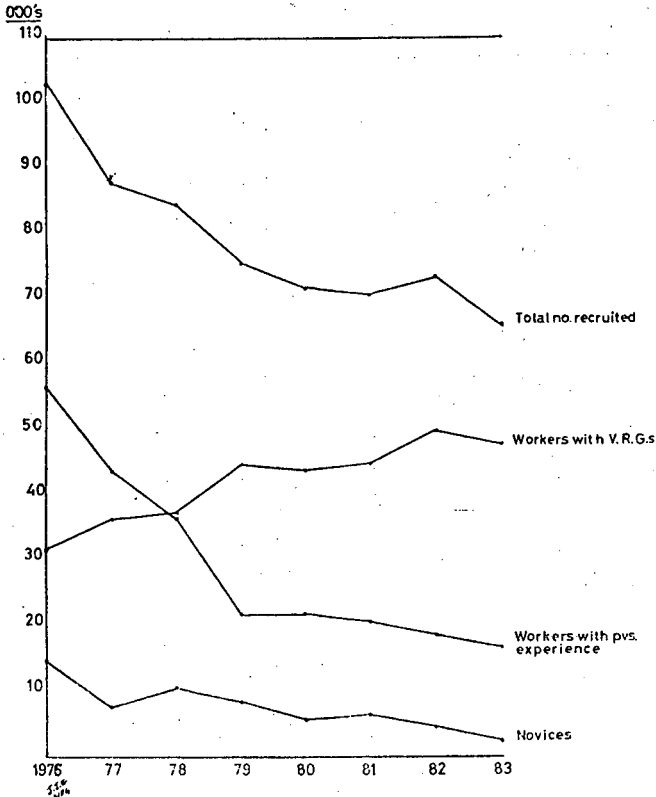


Sources: Annual Statistical Bulletin, Maseru, Bureau of Statistics, 1982
 Development Studies Southern Africa (BENS0), IV, 4 (1982)
 TEBA

What is certain is that workers are being selected out of the potential work force on the grounds that their records suggest that they are reliable, that they are in possession of skills required by certain mines, that they are prepared to extend the time they spend on the mine and limit the time they spend at home. The policy works against the man who has fallen out with the mine authorities, who has spent too long a period at home - and also against the novice. This is clearly indicated by the figures provided by TEBA on the categories of workers recruited by that organisation in Lesotho since 1976, and are presented in Figure II

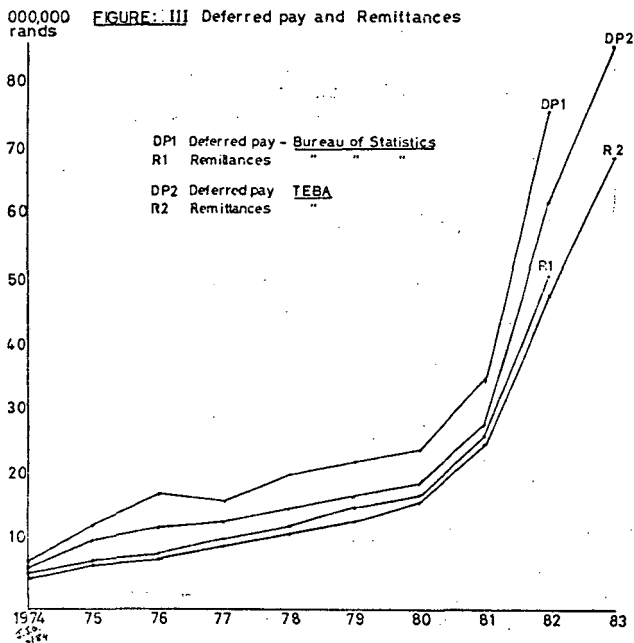
FIGURE II

TEBA's changing employment strategies:
categories of recruited Basotho workers



Sources: Murray, 1980: TEBA

A question which must be raised is whether, taken as a whole, the Basotho work force is participating significantly less in wage labour in South Africa - or whether certain workers have increased their participation at the expense of others. Spiegel (1982) has pointed out that the evidence from Lesotho, together with that from other rural areas in Southern Africa, suggests that since the mid-1970s there has been an increasing tendency towards 'rural differentiation' - the creation of a social stratum on the Southern African periphery with access to wages and, as a result, rural resources, and a socially advantageous situation on the one hand, and an increasing large rural proletariat on the other, denied access both to wages and rural resources. This tendency appears to be confirmed by the extraordinary increase in the amount of voluntary remittances and deferred pay (the compulsory remittance of at least 60% of wages to Lesotho) since 1980.



Increases of this magnitude, when the number of workers engaged is dropping, and those in employment perhaps stable, can only partly be explained by the increased demand for resources coming from the rural areas as a result of the recent drought and strongly suggest the emergence of a group of Basotho workers, numerically restricted but increasingly well-paid, diverting more cash to their households. The advantages accruing to these households however has to be seen together with the emergence of an increasingly large number of disadvantaged households, members of which are unable to obtain VRGs and therefore work on the mines. And any examination of changing Basotho employment patterns has to take into consideration the number of young men coming onto the labour market each year. A recent analysis estimates that in Lesotho 'population and labour force will both increase by 2,5% annually, averaged for the rest of this century.' (Eckert, 1983) And yet, as Figure II shows, the number of novices being employed is steadily decreasing.

Although it is the economic situation which has caught the attention of analysts the changing political environment has also to be considered when examining unemployment amongst Basotho workers. One recent development which has, according to our informants, seriously affected their ability to obtain employment, and which has not been discussed in the literature, is the restrictions imposed by the South African authorities at the border posts. The diplomatic relations between Lesotho and South Africa have become increasingly tense over the past few years with the Republic accusing Lesotho of harbouring ANC guerillas and Lesotho alleging that dissidents have mounted attacks on Lesotho from South Africa. This culminated in the South African Defence Force raid on Maseru in December 1982. Since then there have been delays at the border posts and numbers of Basotho have not been allowed to enter South Africa. The exact nature of these restrictions remains a subject of debate and difference between the two countries but this press summary is perhaps sufficiently accurate for our purposes.

South Africa imposed strict border controls in July. (1983). This allows only Masotho who are already working in South Africa and those holding valid six-month multiple entry visas into South Africa.
(Rand Daily Mail, 10 November 1983)

It has been the practice in the past, when Basotho workers have been unable to join as required through a recruiting office in Lesotho, to go to a mine where they are known, or perhaps contact an employed relative who is known, and negotiate directly with mine management for documentation which agrees to employment. This document is then endorsed by the local Liason Office, brought into Lesotho where a contract is signed. Although this practice is not encouraged by the recruiting agencies in Lesotho, it is nonetheless accepted. The stricter controls at the border however seem to have made this form of gaining employment difficult - if not impossible. Whatever the politicians might be saying about the situation at the border posts, the men interviewed in this project were without doubt - they could no longer obtain work because 'the gates were now closed'.

While the exact nature and dimensions of the problem are difficult to ascertain, the fact of unemployment amongst workers in Lesotho is easily observable. As a result the focus of the debate on migrant labour has shifted in a remarkably short time from discussions on the social problems created by labour migrancy together with the possibility of creating a cartel of labour-supplying countries, towards the stark problems raised by increasing destitution. And it is the reality of the threat of destitution, confronting men whose lives and expectations have been defined by labour migrancy, upon which our research has concentrated.

Research methods

The phenomenon of unemployment and destitution created by the situation discussed above can be observed in Lesotho's capital, Maseru, at those places where men gather in the hope of obtaining a 'piece job' - that is daily employment as casual labourers.

For a week, from 27 August 1983, Thabane observed and associated with men at two of these places - the railway station, and the traffic circle where Lesotho's major north-south road meets with Maseru's main road, and where there is a concentration of the traffic flow. The circle is also within a few hundred metres of the major recruiting offices. Investigation suggested that the

men at the railway station formed a somewhat closed group for whom casual labour had become a permanent way of life, while those at the circle sought 'piece jobs' in order to be able to stay in the vicinity of the recruiting offices where they still hoped to be given contracts to work in South Africa.

It was decided that the latter group - those at the circle - should form the basis of our study. These men were actively engaged in attempting to find work in South Africa. Their involvement in casual labour was made necessary by the fact that they had thus far been unsuccessful in obtaining contracts and they sought casual labour in an attempt to prolong their stay at the recruiting offices. We therefore in this paper refer to them as 'unemployed', and reject any attempt to define them as 'underemployed'.

The number of men at the circle fluctuated from perhaps 60-80 in the early morning, the number falling off as the day progressed. A minority were successful in obtaining 'piece jobs' and the rest drifted off during the course of the morning. Observation suggested a high daily turn-over of individuals, except for the few who were living in the vicinity of the circle itself.

From 19 September 1983, 20 men were interviewed in the space of a week. Basic information was recorded on a questionnaire before a set of 42 questions were asked in a fairly free interview. The answers were recorded on tape and these have been transcribed and translated into English. The transcribed translations are very literal ones. When using extracts from these translations in this paper we have frequently altered them so that they might be more comprehensible and accessible.

Quotations from this evidence are cited, for example, as 11/547. The figure 11 refers to the number of the informant. The 547 refers to the reading on the counter of the tape recorder, as entered in the margin of the translated transcription. The quoted passage (in the original literal translation) will be found at some place after 547 and before the next entered reading of the counter.

	Informant	Age	Education (std)	non-mining skills	Children	Dependants	Livestock	Land (fields)	Property*	Years on mines	No. of mines	Mining skills	Reasons for cessation of work	VRG	Length of time in Maseru	Residence
Novices	3	19	/	/	/	10	2	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	7 mths	acquaintance
	2	20+	/	driver	/	3	1	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	9 mths	relative
	4	21	2	/	/	1	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	2 mths	relative
	10	24	5	bricklayer	/	3	/	/	F	/	/	/	/	/	4 mths	the Hill
First contract 1973 or after	9	21	/	/	/	2	11	1		77-78	3	lasher, loco-driver	late return: dismissed	VRG expired	2 mths	the circle
	6	24	3	/	1	10	12	2		76-78,81-83	3	drill, loco-driver, winch, shaft-sinker	absconded: dismissed	No VRG	2 mths	recruiting agency
	13	24	7	elect.asst.	/	5	3	/		76-79	1	drill, elect.asst.	mine closure	No VRG	3 mths	relative
	11	25	/	/	/	10	/	/		77-80	7	drill, lasher	changed workplace:dsmd.	No VRG	12 mths	acquaintance
	20	27	/	/	/	7	/	/		76,78-80	4	boss-boy, drill, winch	injured and discharged	No VRG	24 mths	relative
	16	27	5	/	/	5	/	/	FI	73,75,77-79	2	drill, winch	late return: dismissed	VRG expired	6+mths	the circle
	7	30	/	/	2	7	5	1		74-75,77, 79-82	4	boesman,drill, elect.asst. spanner-boy	pay dispute: left	No VRG	11 mths	the Hill
12	33	/	/	3	4	2	/	/	75-78	1	winch	ill: discharged	No VRG	2 mths	hired room	
First contract before 1973	19	21?	/	builder	2	8	10	2	1	72-76	5	drill	ill: discharged	No VRG	4 mths	relative
	17	31	6	builder, welder	/	2	/	/	F	72-78	3	instructor, lasher, loco reduction-plant, mapaka	late return: dismissed	VRG expired	4 mths	home
	18	33	/	/	3	6	2	3	1	69,72?	4	drill	mine closure	No VRG	3 mths	the circle
	1	38	/	weaver	3	4	3	/	/	71-72,74-75 77-80	3	lasher, loco-driver, timber-boy, winch	late return: dismissed	VRG expired	5 mths	acquaintance
	8	38	/	weaver	3	12	4	1	1	64,65,66,68, 69,70,72	5	boesman, drill, foreman	late return dismissed	VRG expired	2 mths	relative
	15	41	1	brickmoulder	1	6	3	2	1	62,63,64,70	6	lasher, skip, winch	ill: discharged	No VRG	a few weeks	relative
5	43	1	weaver	7	9	60	2	1	59,60,62,63, 65,67-81	5	boss-boy, drill, timber-boy winch, shaft-sinker	mine closure	No VRG	2 mths	recruiting agency	
14	59	/	/	6	10	20	3	1	58-78	3	bossman,drill,loco-driver foreman	late return:dismissed	VRG expired	35 mths	the circle	

* 1 = farming implements (chains, yokes, ploughs)
F = furniture

TABLE I

Analysis

Table I summarises some essential features of the lives of the men who were interviewed, including their age, education, position in the household, their previous work experience, their reasons for losing their jobs and their histories as workseekers.

Informants have been divided into 3 categories. The fact that novices constitute 1/5 of the number of informants does not reflect the proportion of novices seeking casual labour - because of the limited amount of information novices could provide it was decided not to interview more than this number. The division of the remainder of the informants between those who had taken contracts before 1973, and those who had taken their first contracts after that date is fairly arbitrary - although the men with the longer experience would tend to have a greater knowledge of conditions of work before the introduction of the VRG and the marked increase in mine wages during the last decade.

Education Formal educational standards were markedly low with more than half the informants having no schooling at all. The great majority asserted that their educational limitations were the result of having to leave school to herd stock, either for their families, or as the result of being hired out at an early age to herd for others. Many informants expressed a sense of failure and disappointment at their lack of education and suggested that this lack was an important cause of their present predicament.

Non-mining skills were also limited with more than half the informants not admitting to any skills outside those learnt on the mines - although of course we can assume the possession of a certain expertise in agriculture and animal husbandry.

Children As could be expected there was a general increase in the number of children with age. However it is significant to note that the number of

Dependants did not increase as markedly with age, and everyone interviewed had at least 1 dependant, and some of the youngest had as many as 10. Of course a detailed investigation into the household would have been able to break down this crucial category but, as this was not the point of our study, this remains a very rough category which includes amongst dependants, parents and their brothers and sisters; wives and children; brothers, sisters and their offspring. But whatever the specific kinship links the sense of commitment to dependants was a matter of overriding concern for the informants. And as can be expected in a situation where mine wages form such a significant part of household income, the awareness of unfulfilled responsibilities and the sense of failure on the part of a breadwinner, pressed heavily on most informants. One man lived in fear of meeting 'people from home' in the streets of Maseru. (14/068). Another spoke of the

many difficulties in going home. I think of these problems - I left home with a lot of money saying I am coming here to queue. This money could have been used at home. Now if I go back again, when I get there, the children will look up at me and say, 'What has our father brought for us?' (1/360)

At the same time we have to remember that the relations of dependency are often reciprocal and the unemployed man in Maseru does receive assistance from relatives at home. Our informants spoke quite frequently of receiving presents of cash or food from relatives passing through Maseru, or visiting the town specifically to give assistance.

Stock 14 of our informants had stock of some kind (we took a sheep or goat as half a stock unit). The possession of stock is clearly considered to be of great importance and the accumulation of 'animal wealth' - whether it is objectively possible or not - is considered by many to be the last barrier to destitution. It is therefore doubly painful when the unemployed are forced to sell their stock to support themselves and their household (5/171: 15/547):

Money is short and the children are without clothes, and there is hunger and I am going to finish my animals because I sell them to buy food and so on. That is the reason I am here - for my plan is to cross to South Africa so that instead of selling the animals I can buy more and add to them. (1/545)

Land Over half the informants did not have arable land of their own.

Property This is another category of great complexity which we did not investigate in any detail. However we did try and get some idea of the property in the possession of our informants and have noted in Table I those who had agricultural implements - in the form of yokes, chains or a plough. Next to farm implements of this kind the most common form of property was furniture and one informant possessed a sewing machine.

Years on mines This is a difficult category to reconstruct with accuracy, particularly as far as the older informants are concerned. The table does however give an indication of the informants' experience on the mines.

Mining skills Most informants had a wide variety of experience and range of mining skills. The transferability of these skills is of course severely limited, as one informant was painfully aware:

The education gained on a mine, that is the knowledge you get there, is only useful there on the mine. When you leave you do not have knowledge.
(13/307)

Reasons for cessation of work range from mine closures, injury and illness, differences with management leading either to dismissal or absconding, to the failure to meet the time requirements of the VRG. As might be expected many of the informants felt that they had been treated unjustly. This was especially true in cases where VRGs had lapsed by a day or two (11/147) or through minor oversights or the accidental loss of a document:

When I got to the gate I discovered that the pass had remained at home. I went back home and found it but then the vehicle had left, I had to catch a train, and when I got to the mine it was said that I had loafed for two days and by then I had been discharged.... I then queued here till I gave up and went back home. I came again to see whether I could be hired and found out that, ache, that it is still difficult because they want bonuses. (8/055)

Or

You have to make sure that the days of the bonus don't expire, because if this is the last day, the day you think you should be here at the NRC, they tell you that you have eaten your bonus because by the time you get to the mine the bonus would have expired. (11/147)

VRG

Length of time in Maseru This was usually a matter of months although three informants had spent 1, 2, and 3 years in Maseru. Most informants had visited their homes during this stay.

Residence Most of the informants lived in shelter of some kind, usually provided by friends or relatives - often without charge - although there was reciprocation if the opportunity arose. 6 of the informants lived in the open - either in the hills around Maseru, or at the circle itself.

III.

The worker's perspective

The men who form the subject of this paper are men trapped - or as one of them puts it, ho jema, that is 'jammed'. They are trapped geographically temporally, and economically between the two areas which form the polarities of their social existence: between the place of work and the rural household; between the place where they earn the wages upon which they and their families ultimately depend and the place where this income enters the 'development cycle'; between individualised wage labour on the mines and social agricultural production at home.

In this final section we have selected certain topics for presentation either because they have relevance to the debate on unemployment - for example, the extent of the involvement of unemployed migrants in casual labour, or those job opportunities they find unacceptable - or because they emerged as recurring themes in the evidence given to us. Although we have presented this evidence under specific headings we do feel that the totality of the evidence does give an impression of the unemployed's general perspective of their predicament at the time of the interviews.

Casual labour The reason for taking 'piece jobs' was to obtain sufficient cash in order to purchase food which would then allow informants to 'queue' at the 'NRC'. Once that cash reserve was spent they had to try again for a 'piece job'.

How many times a week do you go to TEBA?

... as long as I have money for food I go. What makes it impossible to go is when I have to go without money for food for if I don't get hired then I will get hungry. That is what makes me wait for a piece job. (T07242)

There was general agreement on the frequency with which casual employment could be obtained, rates of pay, and the type of work most commonly offered. No informant had ever had a week's continuous employment while operating from the circle. With 'luck' 2 or 3 days work could be obtained in a week. The usual payment was R3 a day. The common work was loading vehicles with building materials, or with goods ('lashing'). Construction work was fairly frequently obtained together with miscellaneous labouring tasks such as gardening.

Only one informant believed that the amount of money received from casual labour was sufficient for his subsistence needs (and he was the youngest man interviewed) and the majority had spent many hungry days. And it was not just personal deprivation which haunted our informants but the suffering of those at home:

Ache, it is not enough to enable us to live - it makes life possible but not quite possible because to make life possible it has to make life possible for the family as well, not for me alone. To make life possible it has to be for the family as well. (8/295)

Casual labour is of course not only insecure but makes the worker extremely vulnerable to exploitation:

Ntate (father), you can't believe those who hire you. One might say 'He, you must come tomorrow and I shall come and pick you up here.' And then he doesn't come. For a whole week you stand there expecting that he will come and fetch you in his vehicle.... (14/220)

And there are those who after the day's work is completed say

'Monna (My man), as things stand now, my vehicle has broken down and the truth is that I didn't get any money. We should all weep....' Meanwhile the truth is that you have worked and are tired. Even so there is nothing to eat, and you will have to go to sleep having just drunk water. It is because of this that people become thieves and so on because of the

problems created by the fact that even when you work, it is not a serious job, because some employers cheat you regardless. We have difficulties. Sometimes you work and lash six loads and then he gives you a rand or two - just depending on how compassionate his heart is. (13/531)

Refusal of work The majority of informants said they had never refused work and would not do so. The exceptions were the two men who had refused to consider recruitment to either the police or the para-military force (6/537: 10/220) and the one who had refused to consider becoming 'a collector of honey' - a euphemism for the disposal of night soil. (17/062)

The awareness of the possibility of being driven to illegal activities was clearly present in the minds of many informants. One informant said he hoped that he could avoid thieving, and another had refused an offer to traffic in dagga:

Ache, work that I would refuse to do ntate under whatever circumstances even if I was promised to be paid, is that of selling - there is a thing here - some say they want to hire people to go and fetch dagga and come and sell it. Even if somebody said they would pay me a thousand for that I would not take it. As for all other jobs ache I would do them if I could find one. (1/010)

But for men facing destitution even the consequences of being apprehended in criminal activities had certain advantages:

A person ends up pretending that he is mad and...he will steal ntate, and he will go to prison because he is in need. But there at the prison he will eat - he won't be killed but he will eat. It is this that makes many people do those kinds of things - it is because they do not have work. (17/081)

Increased vulnerability as workers The awareness that a dispute with mine management could lead to a failure to regain a contract on any mine must obviously increase management's confidence in its relations with workers and make workers more amenable to control. As an informant recounted, when speaking of a dispute over the issuing of waterproof clothing (likhoehla) while underground:

We quarrelled with the employer, one of these white people, these ones who have been put so as to be shift-boss. We quarrelled in this manner with the employer. I drill with a machine, we did not have likhoehla. I went to the office to report that 'I do not have likhoehla, morena (Chief), although I drill with a machine and the water is killing us.... He pointed out that if - if I did not want to work I should go back to my home where there are many people here in Maseru. All he has to do is to shake a bush and people appear. (7/060)

Bribery With the increasing demand for contracts there have been cases of recruiting agency staff taking bribes.

There is another issue concerning money: These clerks are bought with money and we know that what works is money. When you have paid tjotjo (a bribe) it is only then that you might get the means to cross. (11/257)

It must be pointed out however that only three of the informants stated that they felt it was necessary to use a bribe to obtain a contract. (9/236: 11/257: 19/556)

Workers' explanations for unemployment As we have seen the unemployment being experienced amongst Basotho is the result of complex series of factors, some originating in international developments, some regional, and others the consequence of local events. Miners' perceptions and explanations have a narrower focus but are nonetheless extremely significant.

(i) The 'closing of the gates'. Amongst the most common explanation was the one mentioned above - that 'the Boers have closed the gates', thereby making it impossible for work-seekers to obtain contracts in Lesotho by initially negotiating a promise of work with mine management. (1/597: 2/077: 3/259: 5/314)

I fetched a document from President Brand when I left that place.... Now here they say I should go and renew it.... Then it happened that they closed the bridge and up until now I have not gone there, because there is no place where I can cross. (6/191)

Or

It is said that no more crossing is done. What causes the problem now is the Boers. They have closed the gates..... We used to come to Maseru where we knew that there were a lot of jobs. When I later realised that it had become difficult and when I had the money, I would take a few days to go to South Africa to look for a job, and when I came back I would bring a document for evidence that I had been hired by whites and then produce this document at the NRC. Now that things have changed it is difficult in every direction. (9/145)

(ii) The 'high price for a head'. Another factor referred to frequently as a reason why Basotho are finding it difficult to obtain contracts is the high attestation fee - the sum of R10,15 which the recruiting agencies

pay the Lesotho government for every man recruited - or as the informants put it - the money paid to the government for a man's head. A similar figure is in fact paid for all foreign workers hired, while R2,00 is paid for workers from the Transkei and R1,00 for workers from other homelands. Although the recruiting agencies feel that in spite of the high attestation fee the comparative accessibility of Basotho workers and the resultant low costs of transport still make their recruitment economically worthwhile, it is clear that mine officials use the attestation fee to intimidate Basotho workers. And the workers themselves are convinced that the fee is one cause of their present difficulties. Thus we have the statement that

It is said that our government is now expensive as we people of the mines are sold and a person's head is now bought for ten rands here in Lesotho and those from such places like the Colony (Xhosas and so on) a person's head is still bought for one rand when he goes to a mine. (1/290)

This argument, in some cases at least, seems to have its origin in statements made by officials on the mines on the policy of 'internalization'.

Ache, the way I see things is that they no longer like the Basotho a lot! It is mainly the Batswana and Maxhosa who are working there now. As far as the Basotho are concerned there are now very few of them whereas before there were actually a lot of them, they were more than all those other people.... They said in a meeting that a manager had said that they no longer wanted Basotho in the mines of Bleskop. They are just being humane to them because they are the people who have an understanding of work especially in the higher ranks of workers, and now that they are teaching these other people the work, these Batswana, they are going to end up closing the mines to the Basotho completely.... Now when they talk, they always say that now that Lesotho is independent... and Basotho are bought for too much money, and the Maxhosa are bought for only two rands as well as the Batswana from Bophuthatswana. (5/282)

(iii) Unemployment and 'destabilization'. The shift from this argument to a more overtly political one is easily made. The government of Lesotho is blamed for the high attestation fee (6/340), consequent unemployment, and some informants expressed the wish that the government would reach some accommodation with the South African authorities.

When I listen to the radio here (it becomes clear) that unless the government of Lesotho can become reconciled with that of the Republic.... That is the only thing that can make it possible for matters to return to normal. But they remain hostile to each other and I cannot see what will happen. (5/377)

The same informant blamed South Africans who had taken refuge in Lesotho for

the situation:

This dispute started with these people who ran away to this side. Ever since that month of December when there were those disturbances (the raid of December 1982) Lesotho has not had good relations with the Republic... their running over to this side should be discussed so they can go back. (5/388)

But wherever the blame is specifically placed the evidence suggests generally a significant number of the unemployed are locating the responsibility for their predicament on the local authorities - and this clearly has implications for the present debate on 'destabilization' in the region. (6/340-481)

The real cause of the matter is this state. The way the South Africans see it they are being reviled. They say Lesotho says she is independent but it does not have the strength and still depends on that side over there. Yet even while it depends on that side over there, this country of Lesotho goes to other countries and asks for aid. Yet it is dealing with South Africa. (7/433)

Workers' perceptions of migrant labour. While the immediate threat of destitution has tended to push the suffering caused by the migrant labour system into the background it was not totally excluded by informants, nor should it be by analysts of the situation. None of the informants (with one possible exception) saw migrant labour as forming the basis of a 'career': it was still felt to be a necessity which allowed the accumulation of capital to build the homestead, to feed, clothe, and educate the members of the household, and to provide capital for agriculture and the accumulation of stock. Unemployment only made it more necessary to 'trust the soil'. (8/218) However the ideal for a large number of informants was to go beyond farming and open a store, a bar, or a hotel. Thus mine labour was a necessity with many disadvantages - an unpleasant means to an end, for as one informant put it, 'A mine is not a heritage', (1/307) and another spoke vividly of the debilitating effect of long periods of labour underground:

In the mines there you will work for four months or work for six months, get fed up with work, and now feel like a rest. But you find that there is no rest for when you try and rest this money gets finished and you go back once again. You are going to work in a mine and it is hard work. All the time you wade in water, and this takes part of you. I might be older or younger than you, but if I work in a mine, underground, I will get

old before you do, because my body is being shaken roughly all the time. One part of my life is being drained and remains there.... (7/358)

But of course, faced with destitution, such perceptions of a miner's life recede, for the moment at least.

Workers' perceptions of unemployment

(i) Failure, Frustration, Squalor and Disaster. The personal frustration and the sense of having failed others through the inability to obtain contracts is a recurring theme.

My children are not living ... in order for us to live we should eat. But now I am not working it is just like - these hands of mine have been cut off and I am useless. Now life for my children will be difficult, they will scarcely eat. Now that I am not working - I do not know what I shall do or what I shall take and put against what.... They live in a difficult manner nstate.... except that I have my brother and he is the one who when I am not working throws something at them so that they can get the means to get food. He is at a mine now. (7/313)

Or, the dashed hopes and fears for the future:

As you see I am still a young person, I am fresh. I don't feel pain anywhere. But because of this matter of what we shall do, of not getting jobs our heads have jammed, my morena. We don't get a chance to pay tax and to cross the border as in the early days to go and work. That is the problem and we are jammed. We don't know, we just don't know, we only wait for things to come right, that is all we can do. Right now we are young people and we still want to take a girl and stay with her. But this is a problem: what means do we have to take somebody else's daughter? (16/185)

Others spoke of their distaste for the squalor which unemployment was forcing them to experience:

We just sleep in the wilderness. You sleep without having eaten and you get up without having eaten. Tomorrow you go and look for a job, you don't get it, you come back. When you come back you go about uncovering rubbish bins thinking
'Could it not be there is something that has been thrown in here banna, just a little something that I can chew?
You sleep again in the wilderness. You get up in the wilderness again. You go and look for a job. Sometimes with luck you'll get it, you'll get something with which to puy some papa. (97308)

The dreadful consequences of the combination of hunger and liquor are well known:

You can see the cruelty that has befallen those of us who stand here and what it is. Our small problem is that most people are now drinking liquor because of hunger; because you find sometimes that if you are hungry you must drink to give you support in the stomach. That would be because you have not managed to get a piece job---- Maybe someone has taken you and made you work and when he was supposed to pay in the evening he was not

there, he has disappeared.... You go and sleep in hunger having worked in hunger..... Now you will end up seeing a lot of people eating from rubbish bins like this. It is a matter of losing heart because of not having jobs and having to help the stomach through drinking. (6/300)

One informant was very aware of the impropriety, of the abandonment of sound values and good order, which unemployment was forcing on men:

It is a very difficult life nstate, this life at the place where we are. At the moment you should know that most people have turned themselves into lunatics even if they are mentally alright because you find that if the vehicles have not come, and he has failed at the rubbish bins.... they just pick up this dirty food. A person does not even care that there may be poison there but truly he just eats.... We aren't all like that because of unemployment but the conditions are terrible - we have become, in our own country, not like people. (17/081)

And some informantshirted at a dreadful vision of an anarchic future with every man's hand turned against the other:

Ache, I think that we shall go back to the ways of the cannibals.... At some time we shall eat each other (13/457)

We people are going to eat each other like animals. Perhaps some will eat enough and others will get hungry you will not know. Just like you see us in this condition. You see a young person like me, who is not even married yet, already looking like this. (16/212)

Ache, here in Lesotho the way I see it is that we will eat each other - The people of Lesotho - that is if we do not get jobs because others steal, others kill people, some do all these bad things. For what reason? just because of hunger.... (19/006)

(ii) Those with some hope. In very general terms it is perhaps useful to consider the men we interviewed as falling into two broad categories. There were those who, notwithstanding the difficulties, were determined to keep on searching for work. Although all of them were in Maseru specifically to find work on the mines none now dared to express the hope that they would be successful. Nonetheless they had not lost hope altogether. Some had begun to think that they might get a more permanent job in Maseru.

Ache nstate I have decided just to go on struggling like this because I do not know how I can change my plans except if I stick right here where at least I can find some food for the children. (12/108)

Or,

This is my wish, ntate: here on earth I have not learnt to read, I have not done anything, I have not done anything inside this country of ours.... We are now stranded as there are no jobs. I can help where there is work. I can take a job, whether it is work in the police force, whether it is work in the para-military force, whether it is a job to come and sweep at an office, I would accept it just in order to avoid the way of theft. (7/344)

Others were considering returning to their homes where they might share their resources with others and attempt to farm on a sharecropping basis, (1/391: 6/495: 7/288) or attempt to support themselves through craft activities. One informant, whose hesitation and lack of clarity reflects his own indecision and realisation of the difficulties involved said:

My plan is that - just like when we plough sometimes we get crops and sometimes we do not - that is the plan I am considering. Sometimes I even think seriously that it is better for a person to work for himself. But in most cases working for one's self is difficult if you have to be under somebody else, or in partnership with another and he gives you money to send to the children. Or weaving jerseys - I know how to weave but even then it is difficult to buy wool and then perhaps you couldn't sell the jersey after weaving and you would end up reducing the price and only get the same amount that you paid for the wool. (8/336)

(iii) The drift to despair. But there was also a drift from such pessimistic but determined attitudes towards despair:

Truly I have been thinking of this for some time and I cannot find how I can...what plans I can make.... If I could get a job here in Maseru after I have gone home to see how the children are living, but even here I do not know how I will get it because I have been walking here looking for a job for some time now and not getting one. And I am just struck as to what... how to maintain those children? (5/365)

And some were losing all hope. Like the man who after twenty years on the mines had been in Maseru for three years 'living a life of suffering'. He was now sleeping in the open and although he had worked through the winter he had not been paid and was attempting to bring the dispute with his ex-employer to the authorities. He had been unable to make contact with his family. He had come to accept that he could never go back to the mines as he was no longer

heavy enough to pass the medical examination:

When I get there and climb on the scale which people climb onto, I am now old, and I am no longer on that number that could enable me to go and work. (14/107)

He was now beginning to beg and felt

like a dead person. Like a person who is not there because you do not know what or whether people at home are still alive. (14/160)

(iv) Re batho ba mona . But even this man's predicament cannot be compared with that of those who have been defeated by the situation, those for whom the links between the work place and the home have been finally ruptured, those who are beyond being interviewed:

They end up looking like people who are insane and yet they are not insane. It is because of worries, just because of worries as to what would happen if he went home - what the children would say about who he is, and where he had come from, what he had been doing. It is these kind of things that, for then a person gives up and says, 'Oeele, I would rather stay here in Maseru and suffer here.' (11/491)

Or,

Some have become afraid of going to their homes because of the way they are.... It is as if they had gone mad ; even when you look at them you find that they are no longer people who can be regarded as sane.... And when he sees a relative or somebody from his home he hides himself as he is afraid of meeting him. (10/275)

One informant gave a particularly vivid description drawn from his own experience and observations of the consequences of prolonged periods without work on men for whom historical circumstances have created an economic and social situation and a world-view which is defined by migrant labour. Men who no longer have a household to which they can return, and are unable to earn the means of establishing one of their own - men who have joined the rootless, the drifters, the marginalised, the 'lumpen-proletariat', so characteristic of the towns of the third world:

Ache, there at the circle life is difficult. Those people there are confronted with a huge problem. It is really bad because there are those there who have drifted away from being normal people. Even their skin when you look at it you will find that because of sleeping outside and

not eating properly or washing the body they now look frightening. In fact a lot of people are scared of them....

Some of them I know, but when I look at them I see that because of the problems of hunger and living in that manner and so on, they have thought too hard and their minds are now not working properly....

There is now a part that I can see is no longer in a condition to function properly... they have just lost hope, they no longer think of anything to do with work or their children. Some of them are mature men who could have five or six or more children, but now, if you ask how long he has been here you would find that it is two or three years. Yet he will not go home.

And others are small boys. You hear them say,

'I have been here for a year.'

And another says,

'I have been here for two years.'

Now these do not have children. Some of them I always try and encourage saying,

'Now it would be better if you went back to look for a job with these wealthy people and look after sheep. It would be much better because now that you do not have children - you do not have a child who sleeps hungry and you will be able to accumulate a lot of sheep, up until you will be able to have your own wife.'

But they refuse altogether...they just refuse....

They just want to go to the mines that is all.

(But) some of them just sit here. They don't have passports. Even when recruiting is done at the NRC they will not go there. There are now a lot of them who do not queue and if you ask them,

'Why is it you do not go in there? Maybe you might find some luck?

They say,

'We no longer have bonuses. We no longer have passports. We are just sitting here. Re batho ba mona! We are now people of here!'

* * * * *

References in text

At present the tapes and translated transcriptions of the interviews are deposited with the Oral History Project of the Institute of Southern African Studies, National University of Lesotho.

The interviews are on nine TDK D-90 cassettes and filed under SIP:1 to 9. The translated transcriptions are in separate folders according to informant and numbered SIP: 1 -20.

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