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# Perceptions of church leaders on the integration of migrant youth into South Africa: The case of refugees in the refugee camps managed by churches at Musina

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Southern Africa has a long history of intra-regional migration, dating back to the mid-19th century. An increasing number of people migrated to escape poverty, seek livelihoods or escape from political upheavals and civil strife, such as the Mozambican and Angolan civil wars. The patterns and scale of these population movements across the globe are constantly in flux. In spite of South Africa being a signatory to all African Union and Southern African Development Community protocols, little has been achieved with regard to the integration of migrants into mainstream welfare services. This qualitative study aimed to explore and describe the perceptions of church leaders on the integration of migrant youth in Musina into South Africa. The new economics theory of migration was used to understand migrant youth's conditions from their host countries, which predisposed them to migrate and end up having challenges of being integrated into South Africa. A descriptive case-study design was used to purposively select two church leaders who are the key informants for migrant youth in their churches. Semi-structured interviews were followed, and data were analysed thematically through Nvivo software. Findings show that many problems migrant youth face start with problems around documentation, which leads to their inaccessibility to government services, poor living conditions and starvation. Findings also show that migrant youth face challenges of rejection and discrimination by local citizens. Therefore, stakeholders in Musina should be empowered to collaborate their services for the integration of immigrants into the mainstream activities of South Africa.

**Keywords:** church leader; integration; migrant youth; refugee; welfare system.

## Introduction and background

Migration is both an internal and international problem, which needs the attention of various disciplines to address it. There are various motives and reasons for migration of people from their home countries (Browne 2017; Devictor 2016). For instance, some are running way from conflicts, while others migrate for better jobs to help their families and provide them with remittances. People, whether internally or internationally, migrate in order to improve their living circumstances. Rugunanan and Smit (2011) postulated that for many individuals and families across the globe, migration has become a survival strategy for escaping armed conflict and human rights violations in their countries of origin. People who migrate are usually the youth. Southern Africa has now became a region on the move (ed. McDonald 2000), particularly amongst the youth. In the past 21 years, an increasing number of people have migrated to escape poverty, seek livelihoods or escape from political upheavals and civil strife (Thet 2014), such as the Mozambican and Angolan civil wars, the effects of which continue to be felt to date on regional development. The patterns and scale of these population movements are constantly in flux. The economic and political collapse of Zimbabwe, for instance, has generated unprecedented outward migration to Southern African countries (Lee 2003; Oyelana 2016). Even as stability gradually returns in Zimbabwe, the humanitarian crises facing its diaspora and the potential for further waves of migration remain high (Adepoju 1995; Castles, De Haas & Miller 2013; Chimni 2009; Crush, Williams & Peberdy 2005; Wolf 2010).

Young people migrate from the northern regions of Africa to the south. There are few bigger variations underlying the swing towards greater intra-regional migration. Firstly, the end of apartheid, a system designed to control movement and exclude outsiders, created new opportunities for internal and cross-border mobility and new incentives for moving. The subsequent integration of South Africa with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region brought about a major increase in legal and undocumented cross-border flows and

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new forms of mobility. Secondly, the region's reconnection with the global economy has opened it up to forms of migration commonly associated with globalisation (eds. Crush & McDonald 2002). Thirdly, growing rural and urban poverty and unemployment have pushed more people out of households in search of a livelihood. Crush et al. (2005) added that the SADC countries are still dealing with the legacy of mass displacement and forced migration. The impact of the Mozambican and Angolan civil wars continues to reverberate. Recurrent civil strife in the rest of Africa has generated mass refugee movements and new kinds of asylum seekers to and within the region.

Browne (2017) stated that economic prospects and education are some reasons behind young people migrating to foreign countries. They migrate to the foreign countries looking for better or decent jobs. Education for children according to Bakewell and Bonfiglio (2013) is considered a family investment. Thus, most people point economic prospects for migrating and that this may also benefit the educational services for their children in the foreign countries. This supports Lee (2003) and Oyelana (2016) who avowed that the growing unemployment and economic hardships in countries like Zimbabwe prompted most youth to look elsewhere for economic livelihoods, either in the urban informal economy or outside the country or both.

According to the United Nations Headquarters [UNH] (2016), international migration has increased drastically. It is estimated that around 243 million people have migrated in the year 2016. To add to this, in 2017, there were about 10 million international migrants from different parts of the world in Africa (United Nations 2017) and the majority of them were young people. South Africa had 4 million international migrants in 2017 (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2017). These statistics support the researcher's observation in Musina town, which is in the northern region of South Africa, that there is an increased number of migrant youth. These international young migrants are mostly accommodated in the churches in Musina, and the researcher has observed that they live in poor living conditions. When these young migrants arrive in the foreign countries, they face a numerous challenges. Thus, the researcher has developed a hunch to explore and describe church leaders' perspectives on the integration of migrant youth in Musina town into the South African welfare system.

## Research problem

Africa remains a continent with complex migration dynamics. The continent is generally characterised by dynamic migratory patterns and has a long history of intra-regional as well as inter-regional migration flows. Conflict, income inequalities and environmental change can result in very low levels of human security that act as push factors for migration. The World Bank (Adams & Page 2003) has pointed out that over time migration is both poverty-driven and poverty-limited: that is, it starts to happen as incomes begin to rise and people in disadvantaged communities become aware of opportunities outside their own localities.

Acknowledging that it is difficult to determine with precision the drivers of youth migration, young people's motivations are often linked to the search for sustainable livelihoods, because of lack of employment and/or under-employment, absence of decent working conditions and poor economic prospects in their countries of origin (Browne 2017). While searching for sustainable livelihoods in South Africa, migrant youth face a number of challenges in the host country. South Africa is a home for a vast number of migrant youth. Some of them are in Musina town, which is approximately 18 km away from Beit-Bridge border post that divides South Africa and Zimbabwe where this study was conducted. These migrant youth are mostly accommodated in the churches, as they do not have their own places of residence. This research argues that there have never been studies that specifically zoomed into the views of church leaders on their experiences with these migrant youth in their shelters. Therefore, this study sought to explore and describe the perceptions of church leaders regarding the integration of migrant youth into South Africa.

## Aims of the study

This study was aimed to contextually explore and describe the perceptions of church leaders regarding the integration of migrant youth into the South African system.

## Theoretical framework

This study was guided by new economics theory of migration, which was found by Stark in the 1980s. New economics theory of migration argues that migration is not determined by an individual migrant independently but is determined by mutual interdependence (Kurekova 2011; Stark 1991). Kurekova posited that the decision to migrate is not made by isolated individuals but by families or households. The decisions of migrants are subjective to a comprehensive set of factors that are shaped by conditions in the home country. This theory was useful in this study to understand the conditions of migrant youth in their host countries that predisposed them to migrate to South Africa where they face challenges of being integrated into the South African system. In the context of this study, young people migrate to South Africa because of socio-economic challenges in their respective countries. Some migrate in order to improve their living conditions together with those of their households. Subsequent to new economic theory of migration, psychosocial theory that has been found by Erick Erikson in an attempt to explain human development also guided this study. Psychosocial theory is useful for any application involving personal awareness and development – of oneself or others. Erikson, as cited in Keenen (2008:5), believed that human development is best understood as an interaction of three systems, namely: the somatic system (all of those biological processes necessary for the functioning of the individual), ego system (includes those process central to thinking and reasoning) and societal system (process by which a person becomes integrated into their society). This theory is ideal as Erikson mentioned that individuals go

through eight stages of development. For this study, stages of development of youth involved the adolescent stage. An adolescent is faced with identity versus role confusion stage with the inclusion of parenthood. Migrant youth might not successfully pass this stage as they will be trying to identify themselves as well as establishing themselves apart from economic prospects. Evidently, Erikson stated that effectively going through every crisis includes 'accomplishing' a sound proportion or harmony between the two restricting manners that represent each crisis.

# Methodology

This was a qualitative study. The qualitative approach was chosen as the study sought to gain the understanding, knowledge and insight of church leaders regarding the integration of migrant youth they have accommodated in their churches into the South African system. This approach is useful as it enables the researcher to gain first-hand experience from the participants (Creswell 2003). To pursue the aim of this study as stated above, a descriptive case-study design was used. Fouché and Schurink (2011) denoted that researchers who opt for descriptive case studies use small number of instances to produce detailed description of cases. Key informant sampling technique was used to purposively select two church leaders in Musina who managed shelters for migrant youth. Semi-structured interviews and observations were used to collect data that were analysed thematically in this study through the help of the Nvivo Software. To ensure the quality of the findings, credibility, conformability, transferability and dependability were followed. Credibility through prolonged engagement, member checking and peer examination was ensured, and field notes were written directly after each interview with each pastor for auditing purposes in order to endure the conformability of the findings. Data were correctly coded for dependability purposes. Data were gathered from a small number of participants ($n = 2$) and they got saturated.

## Ethical consideration

An ethical clearance was obtained from Turfloop Research and Ethics Committee (TREC) of the University of Limpopo with project number TREC/74/2019: IR; permission to conduct the research was granted by Musina Local Municipality in the Limpopo Province, and churches that manage shelters for refugees. The aim of this study as well as the voluntary nature of their participation was clearly explained to the participants; after they verbally agreed to participate, the participants also signed a consent form. To ensure confidentiality, the names and identities of the participants have not been mentioned in this article.

# Discussion of the findings

The following themes emerged upon the interviews with church leaders in Musina on the integration of Migrant youth into the system of South Africa.

## Theme: Inaccessibility of government services

The participants have stated an access to government services for migrant youth in Musina as a problem. One participant stated that government officials always shift the responsibility of migrant youth to the church as they have accommodated them. The other pastor indicated that it is unbiblical to neglect the needy and that the needy is anyone who has been created by God regardless of where they come from. This pastor further indicated that the church has a function to ensure that the needy are taken care of by providing them with basic services. This assertion is in line with the previous studies in relation to the role of the church in assisting the needy that churches are identified as a hub in which a wide range of personal and social services is provided, significantly aiding co-ethnic members to adapt to their new conditions (Hiilamo 2012; Ley 2008).

This is what the pastor has said:

> '[I]t is unbiblical to avoid the needy including the young foreigners in this town. The needy includes everyone who has been created by God. As pastors we cannot leave these young people suffering in our presence. Even though we don't have anything, but at least we can provide them with accommodation.'

The services that were identified included amongst others healthcare services, food parcels and paupers' burial. This validates a study undertaken by the Commission of the European Communities (2008) where it was discovered that immigrants' access to health and basic services, housing, electricity, sanitary living conditions and banking services is heavily constrained. In this study, participants have highlighted constraints of the South African government service which are healthcare services, food parcels and paupers burial.

In corroboration to this, these are the participants' statements:

> '[S]o, our government officials do not want to work together with us. The basic services such as a mere healthcare is not accessible to them. When they are sick, it becomes the burden of the church and we don't have money. The healthcare practitioners would say it is our responsibility to identify the families of these people more especially during death cases and unfortunately we do not have most of their identifying particulars and some of them cannot even speak our language as some come from countries like Malawi, DRC, Angola, Uganda and Zimbabwe. We have asked for food parcels so that at least they can have something to their stomach, unfortunately, we did not receive any and at church there is no food. We only provide them with accommodation.'

> '[W]e don't know the families of these young migrants that we have accommodated in our church. The vision of our church is to look after the needy. These young people do not have a shelter around Musina where they can hide their heads and if we do not assist them, they will roam around our community and steal from members of this community.'

Findings reveal access to government services such as healthcare, paupers' burial and food as constraints for both migrant youth and churches that accommodate them.

Previous studies also have confirmed that immigrants in South Africa have challenges of being denied access to emergency and basic care, including full course of prescribed medication, because of the unwillingness of health professionals as a result of xenophobic attitudes (Bollini & Siem 1995; Nkosi 2004; Pursell 2005). It is therefore imperative that stakeholders in Musina and other surrounding towns collaboratively join their efforts in addressing the integration of immigrants into the South African welfare system. In addition to this, the researcher is of the view that immigration laws should also be tightened and that everyone who crosses the border to a foreign country does so with legal documents. This will enable access to services such as healthcare amongst migrants. If these laws are not tightened, some people can take advantage and cross the borders illegally and upon their arrival to the foreign countries establish intimate relationships with partners in the host countries. If they migrate with chronic diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and/or catch the virus in a host country and be denied access to healthcare services, it will still be a problem for the host country as everyone will be more likely to be infected and affected. Crush (2008) shared the same sentiment that migrant youth are affected by social and health ills such as HIV and AIDS in their home countries and the host countries, and that this will continue to bear the brunt of this youth crisis.

## Theme: Poor living conditions

The participants stated the large number of migrant youth in their churches as a challenge. They indicated that after realising the poor living conditions for immigrants, particularly youth, in Musina town, they erected shelters to provide them with accommodation. One pastor indicated that at their church, they use tents as housing, which is better than one sleeping under the bridge. These migrant youth are reported to be overcrowded in the churches, which is not good for their health. The researcher has observed this during the site visit, not only at the church but also in Musina town. One pastor made an assertion that these migrant youth because of their lack of documentation do not even qualify for Reconstrcution and Development Programme (RDP) houses. These young migrants were stated to be coming from different countries such as Malawi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, Uganda and Zimbabwe. According to 24F(1) of the *National Environmental Management Act* no. 107 of 1998 of the Republic of South Africa, every organisation that accommodates a group of people should be assessed and be recommended by the registered Environmental Health Practitioners. Upon a follow-up question to check if the churches are registered, it was discovered that they are not, reason being that these pastors are not aware about the registration processes and that the government officials do not cooperate with them.

> '[*I*]f you can come in the evening around 5 o'clock when everyone is back from work, you will realise that what you see is not enough. We have a lot of young migrants at church to a point that they do not even know each other and as you can see, the living conditions are not proper, but it is better than sleeping under the bridge. Unfortunately, they do not even qualify for RDP houses due to their lack of documentations.'

In the same wavelength, the other participant stated:

> '[*M*]hmmm…. I was not aware that we are to register the church as we kept them. But since we don't have any government officer who is interested in us, how will that be? Or perhaps must we chase them away? That will be against the word of God and the word of God encourages that we should embrace and love one another.'

Given that Musina town is said to have a large number of young migrants, it confirms Sommers' (2010) sentiments that most cities of sub-Saharan Africa have a volume of migrant youth. Through the researcher's observation, a possible reason as to why a lot of young people migrate to Musina town from their home countries is that the town is closer to the border post (Beit Bridge) bordering Zimbabwe and South Africa, and for job opportunities. Sommers (2010) concurred with this sentiment that most young migrants shift from camps and settlements to cities for better living conditions. However, in South Africa, such conditions, especially if the refugee migrated without legal documents, is not the case.

## Starvation

Most African countries face poverty, which has now become more widespread. According to Myers in Sommers (2010), young people from most of the African cities, such as Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar in Tanzania, and Lusaka, Zambia's capital, are migrating to the southern regions of Africa as their local governments have lost the capacity to meet their responsibilities. Participants in this study have indicated that in their churches, they have young migrants who starve because of unemployment and that unfortunately, the church does not have enough funds to feed them. The other pastor has indicated that they have tried to ask for food parcels from the government officials who were of no help because they wanted legal documents for the migrant youth's permission to South Africa.

The participant echoed that:

> '[*T*]hese young people are starving at the church there and our government is nowhere to be found in order to assist them with food parcels and the church does not have money to buy them food. However, sometimes people from this community would come at the church and pick one or two to give them piece jobs on a very less price, which is better than nothing.'

Findings reveal starvation to be a problem that young migrants face upon their arrival in South Africa. The researcher is of the view that, if one starves, it is more likely that he or she can engage in anti-social behaviours, such as theft, in order to survive. Barclay, Hogg and Scott (2007) in their study in Australia found youth unemployment to be a great problem, with the associated boredom being linked to drug and alcohol abuse and crime. These are the activities that young migrants who are jobless and starving are more likely to indulge in, and unfortunately, the victim will be either someone from a foreign country or a South African. It can be deduced from the findings

that the issue of documentation really impedes immigrants' integration into the welfare system of South Africa. Therefore, youth migration in Musina needs the involvement of all service providers to address it.

## Theme: Rejection and discrimination by the community members

One pastor stated that the community members in Musina reject both young migrants and the churches that accommodate them. The participants further mentioned that members of the community subject the migrants to physical violence. This fact supports Adjai and Lazaridis (2013) who established in their study on migration that xenophobia and a new wave of racism is rampant in post-apartheid South Africa, and that most South African citizen's actions today are not aligned with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, which embodies a culture of inclusiveness, tolerance and human rights, which was the case in the early years of the post-apartheid era. These authors allude that foreign African citizens are being discriminated against and prejudiced. These pastors have indicated that citizens of South Africa are majorly judgemental about people from other foreign countries. Another pastor has stated that some members of the community reject migrant youth because they are supposed to smell bad. This supports Babacan, Gopalkrishnan and Babacan (2009) and Adjai and Lazaridis (2013) who postulated that the proponents of the new racist regime are more judgemental towards their fellow African citizens from other foreign countries.

The participant stated that:

'[M]embers of our community do not want to even see us. They come to our church when they are sick and after we have prayed them for healing they leave. They say these young people from other countries stink. Others even attack them. We cannot judge them as the church as the Bible says we are not capable to judge as God himself is the judge'.

Findings show rejection by some community members in Musina as one of the challenges that young migrants face. This supports Mchunu (2015) who posited that a large number of foreigners are ill-treated, rejected and discriminated against. The researcher is of the view that, in spite of the immigration, more especially the illegal ones, citizens need to develop a culture of accepting one another without rejecting or discrimination against one another.

## Conclusion and recommendations

It can be deduced from this study that the challenges that young migrants in Musina town face start with their lack of legal documents, which in turn prevents their integration into the welfare system of South Africa. Therefore, to curb this problem, all stakeholders not only in Musina town but also in the entire country should coordinate their services according to the specification in the immigration laws. Immigration laws in the host and home countries should be reviewed and tightened, especially with regard to crossing

the border without legal documents. This could possibly be the reason as to why government service providers are reluctant to work jointly with the churches that have illegally accommodated young migrants. The security at the border should also be tightened to ward off refugees who cross the border without permits, probably by installing surveillance cameras at the border. This will minimise the number of young migrants. Government officials who are responsible for registering all organisations that accommodate people regardless of where they come from should enforce their laws. There should also be capacity-building workshops around Musina for the management of all organisations on the migration issues. The government of South Africa together with the government of Zimbabwe should work together towards addressing migration of young people at Beit-Bridge border. Further research should be conducted in order to get data from the perspective of the government officials and the young migrants in relation to the migration of young people to Musina town in South Africa. Lastly, findings have shown that the local citizens of South Africa reject and are prejudiced against the migrant youth. As such, the researcher recommends a culture of accepting each other as Africans amongst the South African citizens.

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### Competing interests

The author declares that no competing conflict of interest exists.

### Authors' contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this article.

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### Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable in this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of any affiliated agency of the author.

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