

Breaking NEW GROUND in the FREE STATE

'Breaking New Ground', the national government's plan for housing delivery has come aground in the Free State. The reasons are worth dwelling on for they raise important questions about service delivery and citizenship in South Africa, reflects IVOR CHIPKIN.

The housing challenge in the Free State must be viewed in the context of very considerable demographic changes. The Presidency's Macro-social Report found that between 1996 and 2001, the Free State lost 44 721 people to other provinces, one reason being the economic decline of the Free State Goldfields. As a whole the population of the Goldfields area dropped from 703 425 in 1996 to 657 013 in 2002. This amounts to a decline of almost 7% in eight years. The other is the decline of the white population – from almost 400 000 in 1991 to 239 060 in 2001, amounting to a loss of slightly more than 160 000 people in ten years – an average decrease of 4.3% per annum.

INFLUX OF TRADERS AND MIGRANTS

These figures, however, are offset by migration into the province especially of work-seekers from Lesotho as well as traders from South-East Asia, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in particular. In many cases these are undocumented migrants for which reliable figures are unavailable. These population movements are not insignificant.

Whilst there is considerable movement in and out of the province there is also much flux among the existing Free State population. Unemployed mine workers are not only leaving the province, they are re-settling in large informal settlements around the large urban nodes of Welkom and Bloemfontein. There they

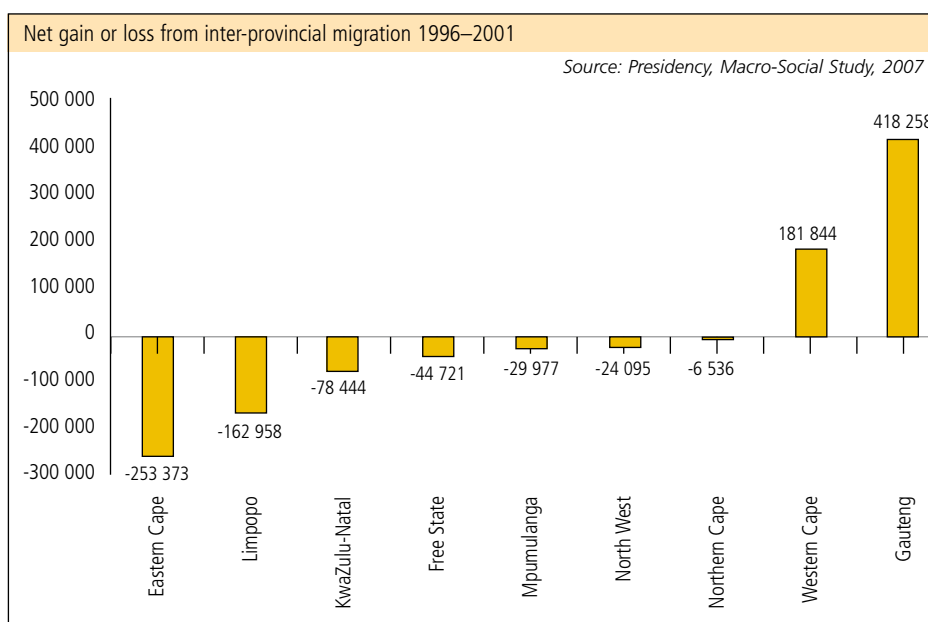
are being joined by former homeland residents from QwaQwa and Botshabelo. Since 1991, for example, the population figure in QwaQwa seems to have declined by more than 40 000 people by 2001 (assuming that the 1991 figure is reliable). The slowing down of the population growth in Botshabelo is also significant in view of the fact that, during the mid-1980s, Botshabelo was considered the fastest-growing urban area in South Africa' (Lochner and Pelsler, 2008: 10).

Related to these changes, urban areas in the Free State have grown by 2.8% per annum between 1991 and 1996 and by 1.5% per annum between 1996 and 2001. In real terms, this represents a growth of nearly 400 000 people in the ten years from 1991 to 2001. 'This growth,' write Lochner and Pelsler, 'was the main contributing factor to the growth of the urban population in the Free State – from 63.7% in 1991 to 70.5% in 1996 and 75.7% in 2001'. Most dramatic has been the decline of the rural population. It decreased by nearly 150 000 people during the period 1991 to 1996, and by a further 140 000 between 1996 and 2001. The largest decrease was that of nearly 230 000 people on commercial farms between 1991 and 2001.

NEW KINDS OF COMMUNITIES

Taken together, important economic changes in the Free State as well as the fortunes of neighbouring countries (Lesotho) and provinces (especially the Eastern Cape) are producing a second wave of urbanisation and in the process generating new kinds of community in the Free State, with several things to note.

In the first place, growing informal settlements around larger urban areas are more linguistically and





ethnically diverse than before. Hostel populations have declined as mines either close down or reduce their operations.

Rather than return either to the Eastern Cape or to Lesotho, where economic opportunities are fewer, Xhosa-speaking migrant workers and Sotho-speakers from neighbouring Lesotho are settling in the urban areas around Welkom and/or moving to the periphery of Bloemfontein. There they have been met by farm workers leaving the rural areas, Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants seeking business opportunities in these new areas, and established coloured and African township communities. There are commuter communities either travelling between former homeland areas on a daily basis or working and staying in the larger towns and cities during the week and returning on the weekend.

Unemployed farm workers and their families, mine workers and their Free State families or partners, commuters, migrants from Lesotho and women seeking independence from difficult home environments are congregated in newly emerging communities on urban peripheries, which are increasingly cosmopolitan, besides increasingly diverse.

COMPLICATIONS IN HOUSING DELIVERY

Leaving aside planning, logistical and financial questions, an important political barrier hampers housing delivery.

According to the national department, the delay of housing projects in some of the Presidential nodes in the Free State is related to a conflict between two contradictory imperatives, the first social and the second legal.

In the first place, many local municipalities, cognisant of the heterogeneous character of many communities and reluctant or fearful of disturbing them, are allocating housing on the basis of who lives in the area, rather than on the basis of who has a right to housing (interview with Monty Narsoo). In many cases, local municipalities are issuing 'letters of occupation' to residents irrespective of whether they are South African citizens or permanent residents or not. Yet this presents difficulties for provincial departments responsible for the processing of subsidy applications. Subsidies are intended for South African citizens or permanent residents only. What, then, is the status of a 'letter of occupation'?

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SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DILEMMAS

Apart from the strictly legal difficulty that this situation presents, it also creates a difficult social

and/or political dilemma. If the provincial government excludes non-South African citizens or permanent residents from receiving subsidies, it risks severely disrupting community life. If it does not, it effectively extends citizenship to people simply on the basis of their presence in the Republic. While some, including this author, may welcome such a situation, the shocking xenophobic killings of 2008 make clear that many South African citizens do not. As long as the intrinsically political character of service delivery is not addressed, it is difficult to fully comprehend why there are delays to its rolling out or the terms of the conflicts that it generates.

Service delivery is always related to questions of citizenship, which in turn is related to broader questions of the society that South Africa wants to be.

Concluding on a research note, research that makes a difference cannot be chiefly concerned with policy research and/or policy design. It may well be that 'applied' research in the South African context needs equally to be ethnographic and analytical to be able to explain why initiatives fail and/or succeed, rather than simply observe that they do, to establish causal links between variables and to go some way to contextualising particular findings in larger processes of change or becoming.

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