



# FOREIGN MIGRATION'S IMPACT: the skills gap?

THE PROSPECT OF MIGRATING workers fuels fears of job losses and crime. But if managed correctly, a more important and positive effect may well be on the skills shortage, which is a major obstacle limiting the growth of our economy.

The skills gap in South Africa is not only felt at higher levels, where firms make decisions to advertise and recruit overseas for skilled migrants. The gap is also spread right across the lower levels of formal-sector employment and in the informal sector, where the South African poor look first if they cannot get a wage job.

Worldwide, there is only one recognised way to fill skills gaps fast, and that is through migration. Migration is often put forward as a way of 'filling jobs that citizens do not want to do', but in this country, it is more about filling vital positions our own citizens are not yet capacitated to fill.

International migrants want to work hard, and they are drawn from the best-educated and most skilled people in their countries of origin. And migrants coming here now are already helping to reduce the skills gap, although not fast enough.

Another problem with our present skills gap is that we do not know what our current skills shortfall would be like without migrants. That is, their skills role in the economy is not effectively quantified or recognised. Migrants filling high-level jobs are probably nearly all legal, documented workers known to the Department of Labour. However, it seems that many of those at the lower levels may be undocumented workers claiming to be South African, some of them working with false

What will foreign migration do to the South African economy once a steady stream of new migrants hit our borders? A reporting workshop of the African Migration Alliance recently launched a book, *Views on Migration in Africa*, which drew attention to the strong prospect of rising migration rates from Africa into South Africa over the next decade, says CATHERINE CROSS.

identification documents. In this case, such workers are not counted as foreign migrants.

We create this negative and unwanted situation by making it hard for migrants to enter South Africa legally. By trying to hold jobs open for South African citizens when there are not enough citizens qualified to fill them, we choke off our own economic growth and stifle job creation.

This is a thorny dilemma for the government, which cannot be seen to encourage foreigners to come here for blue- and white-collar jobs while South Africans themselves desperately need this work. However, holding these jobs open for South African nationals is not realistic. If we had South Africans able to fill these jobs, they would be filled already, and big business would not be complaining.

The very best and most effective skills training will not produce qualified workers overnight; it will be years before we can fill our own skilled-jobs shortfall.

In this part of Africa, we do not have an established tradition of starting and running businesses, and, unlike in West Africa, local children do not grow up exposed to commercial skills. Migrants bring these skills with them and when they hire South Africans, they pass on the skills we largely lack in our indigenous cultural repertoire.

It is a painful truth that some businesses run by the very poor are suffering from competition from foreigners who are more skilled, better educated and better capitalised. But for small business in the informal category – now very underserved with training – the mentoring that migrant employers provide is likely to be the most effective, far-reaching and quickest skills-training programme open to us.

Time is running out. While South Africa tries to kick-start skills provision, our overseas competitors are busy grabbing market share. This is already happening worldwide in markets now dominated by the developed countries with better-skilled workforces than ours. Why not open up a little to migration, and go further towards creating a more flexible labour market using migrants from the north who have the skills we need?

We need to meet the challenge of international industrial and commercial competition as cheaply, quickly, and efficiently as possible, or we risk our economy sinking. Do we have any alternative to migration? •

*Catherine Cross is a chief research specialist in the Urban, Rural and Economic Development research programme. Views on Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa. Proceedings of an African Migration Alliance Workshop can be ordered, or downloaded free of charge, from [www.hsrcpress.co.za](http://www.hsrcpress.co.za).*



# HSRC review

[www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za) **4** VOLUME No. 03 SEPT 2006

**A HEAVY LOAD TO CARRY:**  
women and rural transport