

Nigerians in South Africa: Facts and Figures

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The Migration Issue Briefs are a resource for practitioners. They summarise state of the art research and are intended to inform discussions and debates surrounding human mobility in Southern Africa.

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On 5 March 2012, the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Abuja issued a statement indicating that the Nigerian High Commissioner had summoned his South African counterparts to “receive a protest against the spate of deportation of Nigerian travellers to that country.”¹ This followed the arrest and detention of 125 Nigerian nationals including a Senator, at the Johannesburg International Airport, for attempting to enter South Africa without valid Yellow Fever cards.² The statement concluded, “Both the Permanent Secretary and the High Commissioner agreed that the matter should not be allowed to get out of hand in the interest of the warm and cordial relationship that exists between the 2 countries.”

Behind the diplomatic language, this statement revealed palpable tensions relating to the South African authorities’ treatment of Nigerian foreign nationals. While political and economic relations between Africa’s two economic giants have received sustained scholarly and media attention,³ Nigerian nationals’ place in South Africa has received intermittent and biased attention. Although Nigerians frequently appear as stereotyped caricatures in the South African media, neither the South African government nor South Africa-based scholars have directed much attention to Nigerians in the country.

This issue brief is an attempt to address that gap. By collating publicly available information on Nigerian nationals in South Africa over the past two decades (1990s-2000s), it intends to provide indicative trends regarding Nigerians’ rate of migration to South Africa, their ethnic, socio-economic, and spatial distribution across the country, and their emerging social network. It concludes by raising important questions for future research.

A tiny but growing community of skilled workers, small entrepreneurs and students

Estimates derived from the 2001 South African Census place the number of Nigerians in South Africa at around 7,172, most of them (5,029) concentrated in Gauteng. Overall, this number of Nigerians represented a minimal fraction (0.01%) of the total population of South Africa in that year.⁴

¹ Press release on the deportation of Nigerians from South Africa. Available at:

<http://www.nigeriapretoria.org.za/notice.html>

² Nmehielle, V. O. (2012). “The Undiplomatic Yellow Fever Debacle between Nigeria and South Africa”, *The Envoy*, 16(1). Available at: www.envoyonline.co.za

³ Bilateral relations between the two countries are regularly appraised and have been the object of numerous volumes over the past two decades. Among many others, one may cite: Adebajo, A., and Mustapha, A.R. (2008). *Gulliver’s troubles: Nigeria’s foreign policy after the Cold War*. South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press; Mazrui, A.A., and Kariuki, J.N. (2006). *A tale of two Africas: Nigeria and South Africa as contrasting visions*. London: Adonis & Abbey.

⁴ Space-Time Research from the South African Census 2001. (October 2001 boundaries). Table 1 Country of birth by Geography for Person weighted.

Nigerian arrivals in South Africa began becoming demographically substantial in 2004 when monthly entries passed 2,000, remaining between 3,000 and 4,000 per month between 2008 and 2010.⁵ On aggregate, this placed the number of annual entries of Nigerians nationals at around 36,000 between 2004 and 2010.⁶ Concentrated essentially in the Gauteng, Kwazulu-Natal, and Western Cape provinces, Nigerians in South Africa comprise a primarily male population of small entrepreneurs, highly to medium-skilled workers, students, and dependents. This would point to the majority of medium to longer-term Nigerian migrants to South African urban centres as being on average more educated than the South African domestic migrants with whom they may share the same urban spaces.⁷ In 2003, female migrants represented just over 7% of Nigerians registering their arriving in South Africa. A considerable proportion of these annual entries are for holiday purposes (which may entail short business and shopping trips). In April 2004, 1,284 out of 1,612 Nigerian arrivals were for such purposes.

In addition to those coming for educational and business purposes, some Nigerians are asylum seekers. Over the past ten years, about 1000 to 3000 have applied annually, although the number varies greatly by year (e.g., low of 712 in 2006; 1,082 in 2011; and 3,464 in 2008, a record year across all nationalities for asylum applications).⁸ While these numbers are politically important, they represent less than 1% of the total number of people applying for asylum in South Africa. Whereas people from Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo regularly receive refugee status, the South African government almost systematically rejects Nigerian applicants. (In 2011, Nigerians were rejected in 99.9% of cases compared with 86% of asylum seekers generally.) There are no indications regarding what becomes of rejected Nigerian asylum seekers, and the number of deported Nigerians has remained low over the past five years: between 200 to 400 annually. The Nigerian High Commission in South Africa reports 264 Nigerians were deported in 2010 and 388 in 2011.⁹ This is compared to about 150,000 Zimbabweans deported in 2008.

While emigration (people leaving the country permanently) is not currently recorded by the South African Department of Home Affairs and may affect the overall stock, it is likely that most Nigerian nationals on temporary and permanent residence permits to South Africa continue their stay in the country or circulate between South Africa and Nigeria. Taken together, these numbers suggest that in 2012 the total number of Nigerians in South Africa is likely to be between 12,000 to 17,000. By means of comparison, there were 134,940 Nigerian-born people living in the U.S. or 0.04% of the total American population in 2000¹⁰ and 86,958 in the U.K. in 2001, a share of 0.15% of the British population.¹¹ While these are probably underestimates,

⁵ Statistics South Africa, Tourism and Migration Series 2000-2010, PO351 Statistical Release. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

⁶ It should be noted that numbers of exits are not released to the public by the South African Department of Home Affairs. It is unclear whether records are kept.

⁷ According to entry permits as recorded by the Department of Home Affairs at least.

⁸ UNHCR Statistical Yearbooks 2006 and 2011. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a02afce6.html> ; Department of Home Affairs, 2008 Annual Report on Asylum Statistics. Pretoria: Department of Home Affairs (p.16); Department of Home Affairs, ASM-IMS 2010-2011 Asylum Statistics, May 2011. Pretoria: Department of Home Affairs.

⁹ Communication from the Nigerian High Commission to ACMS, January 2012.

¹⁰ U.S. Census 2000 QT-15. Region and Country or Area of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population. Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3)-Sample Data. Available at: <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

¹¹ UK Office for National Statistics, 2001 Census data. Available at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/census-2001/index.html>

they show that even in countries with historical or more recent traditions of Nigerian migration numbers remain limited and far below the millions cited in the popular media and political diatribes.¹² Even if the exact figures remain elusive, the U.S. and the U.K. receive the overwhelming share of highly-skilled Nigerian immigrants worldwide. While we do not have detailed enough demographic information on Nigerians in South Africa, the types of migration permits Nigerians are granted to stay in South Africa hint at a high average level of education, with a minimum of a secondary education qualification.

Table 1. Presence of Nigerians and Selected Nationalities in South Africa by Province in 2001

	EC	FS	GP	KZN	LIM	MP	NC	NW	WC	South Africa
Nigeria 2001	325	71	5,029	737	177	122	14	131	566	7,172
Malawi 2001	277	257	16,772	2,155	1,070	1,272	101	2,251	935	25,090
Mozambique 2001	284	5,368	121,039	7,063	48,623	52,169	119	34,294	709	269,669

Source: 2001 census data weighted by Statistics South Africa, 2010

Emerging social networks and trends

While there are initiatives to organise the diaspora taken by the federal Nigerian state through its High Commission in South Africa, these seem reserved for diplomatic and highly-skilled nationals. Most social networks recorded were essentially locally based and organised on an ethno-regional basis. In spite of official indications that South Africa is host to a branch of the Nigerians in the Diaspora Organisation (NIDO),¹³ an organisation created by the Nigerian federal government to coordinate Nigerians abroad, this organisation could not be traced in South Africa. Nigerian social networks seem to have spread mostly spatially from the urban neighbourhoods where first-generation Nigerians landed in South African cities. From the limited number of Nigerians who settled in a few buildings in Berea and Hillbrow (Johannesburg) in the mid-1990s,¹⁴ Nigerians have spread across South African main and secondary urban centres. In greater Johannesburg alone there are at least four major Nigerian organisations: the Diamond Brothers Club (Randburg), the West Rand Nigerian Association, the Nigerian Union of South Africa, and the Egbe Omo Oduka (Yeoville). Organised on an ethno-regional basis (the first two are predominantly Igbo whereas the last one is Yoruba), these organisations mainly conduct charitable activities for fellow Nigerians and South Africans in South Africa. In addition to these, a number of village organisations, strictly organised around the provision of support to co-

¹² De Haas, H. (2006). International migration and national development: Viewpoints and policy initiatives in countries of origin. The case of Nigeria. *Working papers Migration and Development series Report 6*. International Migration Institute - James Martin 21st Century School, University of Oxford. A report prepared for Radboud University, Nijmegen and Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS), Ministry of Foreign Affairs the Netherlands. Available at: <http://www.heindehaas.com/Publications/Hein%20de%20Haas%202006%20Nigeria%20migration%20and%20development.pdf>

¹³ See De Haas, op.cit.

¹⁴ See Morris. A. 1998 and 2001.

ethnics and the remittance of funds to development projects in the village of origin, gather regularly in both Johannesburg and Cape Town.

The Nigerian High Commission in South Africa essentially reaches out to the highly skilled and strategic members of its diaspora on the occasion of bilateral commission meetings or at specific award ceremonies. During a 2010 event at Gallagher Estate, for example, the Consulate honoured South Africa-based Nigerian academics, engineers, medical doctors, and fashion designers. The High Commission also distributes a monthly information bulletin, *The Envoy*, which reflects on Nigerians' situation in South Africa and globally through informative opinion pieces.¹⁵

Nigerian Christian revivalist churches are also particularly active across South African main cities, including outside migrant enclaves,¹⁶ where they are successful in drawing audiences of other migrants as well as South Africans. Numerous other places of socialisation, from bars and restaurants to barber shops and salons, are run by Nigerians. Albeit difficult to quantify for lack of data, recent qualitative research points to a trend of intermarriages between Nigerian men and South African women from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds.¹⁷

Nigerians and prejudice: the media, xenophobia, crime, and police harassment

Since the end of apartheid, the South African media have portrayed Nigerians as criminals and threats to South Africans' physical and economic security,¹⁸ relying mostly on state sources over any other source of direct information. However, there is no quantitative evidence of above average involvement of Nigerians in criminal activities. Indeed, over the past twenty years, neither quantitative statistics from police and correctional services nor qualitative research among the police justifies claims that Nigerians are over-represented in criminal activities.¹⁹ On the contrary, new research exposes a number of clear trends:

1. While Nigerians in South Africa seem to be more often incarcerated than their South African counterparts (2.9% of Nigerians in South Africa for an estimate of about

¹⁵ *The Envoy*. Available at: www.envoyonline.co.za

¹⁶ See Hartman, B. "I Want to Go Home but I'd Better Stay Here: Apostolic Zionist Churches as Unique Spaces amidst Xenophobia in South Africa." Presentation at the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) Symposium "Sojourn to the City: exploring the link between religion and xenophobia in urban South Africa (Symposium)"; University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; October 2011.

¹⁷ See Adeagbo, O. (2011). *Perceptual Factors and Nigerian Immigrants in Johannesburg: A Study of the Role of Nigerian-South African Intermarriages in Social Integration*, University of the Witwatersrand.

¹⁸ These conclusions are based on an ACMS study of about 1,500 press clippings from two major South African newspapers, *The Star* and the *Mail & Guardian*, from 1997 to 2011. This confirms findings from a 2000 study: Danso, R. and McDonald, D.A. (2000). *Writing Xenophobia: Immigration and the Press in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Cape Town: Southern African Migration Project (SAMP).

¹⁹ The Nigerian Consulate in Johannesburg indicated in January 2012 that there were 445 Nigerians detained in South African prisons both for criminal and administrative offenses (people having committed criminal offenses as well as awaiting deportations). That would represent about 0.3% of the 5.3% foreign population incarcerated in South African prisons (South African Correctional Services, ICPS World Prison Brief, August 2010. Available at

http://www.prisonstudies.org/info/worldbrief/wpb_country_print.php?country=45)

15,000 Nigerians vs. 0.33% of South Africans), this discrepancy is not a significant difference in statistical terms and may also reflect police targeting;

2. Foreigners in general are more often than South Africans victims of police harassment, extortion, and verbal and physical abuse;²⁰
3. Although the vast majority of Nigerian migrants in South Africa are not involved in crime, there are associations of some Nigerian nationals with crime syndicates and counterfeit goods and drug trafficking. Research shows a form of ethnic specialisation consisting in the tight association between some Nigerian nationals and certain supply chains and markets.²¹

The fact that the very real but demographically marginal involvement of Nigerian nationals in criminal activities continues to obfuscate the richness and diversity of Nigerians' presence only bears testimony to poor reporting by the South African press and a lack of curiosity among the country's scholars.

Areas for further research

Unlike other major migration destinations across the world, South Africa suffers from a scarcity of data, specifically monographs and statistics, on its longer-term migrant communities. While this is true across nationalities, it seems to have particularly affected Nigerians and Somalis, who are among those having suffered most from specific forms of discrimination based on enduring stereotypes. In a context of growing cooperation but also competition between the two African giants (South Africa and Nigeria), a better understanding of the migrant transnational networks that bind them seems critical to pave the way for future scholarly and policy-oriented knowledge and cooperation. Research in almost all directions seems needed. We shall only highlight a few here.

- **Baseline data on Nigerian migration to South Africa**

It is surprising that there is currently no publicly available data whether from Statistics South Africa or from the Department of Home Affairs on this group. While the Nigerian High Commission was cooperative with ACMS in providing data, their contribution was thin. Professional and sustained collection of statistical data could be part of projects discussed by the Permanent Bilateral Commission.

- **The drivers of Nigerian migration to South Africa**

Since the information has not been captured in existing surveys on migrant communities, there is currently very little data to help us understand whether Nigerians' migratory trajectories to South Africa differ from those of other migrants from the region or beyond, or whether their settlement in South Africa is a primary or secondary choice. Too little is also known of the reasons that motivate highly skilled Nigerian migrants to settle in South Africa. whether there are specialisations among them and

²⁰ McDonald, D., ed. (2000). *On borders: perspectives on international migration in Southern Africa*. New York: St Martin's Press and Cape Town: Southern African Migration Project.

²¹ Vigneswaran, D. and Adeagbo, O. (Forthcoming). "International Policing, Mobility and Crime in South Africa." Report No. 3. Johannesburg: African Centre for Migration & Society, University of the Witwatersrand.

whether their choice is long-term or reversible. This would include a better understanding of their real and fantasised involvement in criminal activities, and particularly how these relate to specific forms of livelihoods and to the legal conditions of their access to the South African labour market.

- **Profiling of economic activities and integration into the South African labour market**
While the bulk of highly-skilled Nigerian migration continues to migrate to the U.K. and the U.S., too little is known of those highly-skilled or entrepreneurial Nigerians who deliberately chose to come to South Africa. Research on the sustainability or reversibility of their stay, their integration into the South African economy, their contribution to skills transfer, and their growth over time would help us understand both their expectations of South African society and their assessment of it in a global context.
- **Social, cultural, and artistic exchanges**
While there is anecdotal evidence that such exchanges between the two countries are thriving, with a degree of mutual fascination for musical and film productions in particular, there is very little appraisal of the economic activities generated, intellectual influences in academic circles, or the kind of intercultural subjectivities that this is giving birth to.

Available scholarly sources on Nigerians in South Africa

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