

**REFUGEE AND MIGRANT EXPERIENCES IN GABORONE CITY:
GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT**

**A Report on Integration from Refugees in Towns
Gaborone, Botswana**

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Location: Gaborone, Botswana



Figure 1. Botswana.

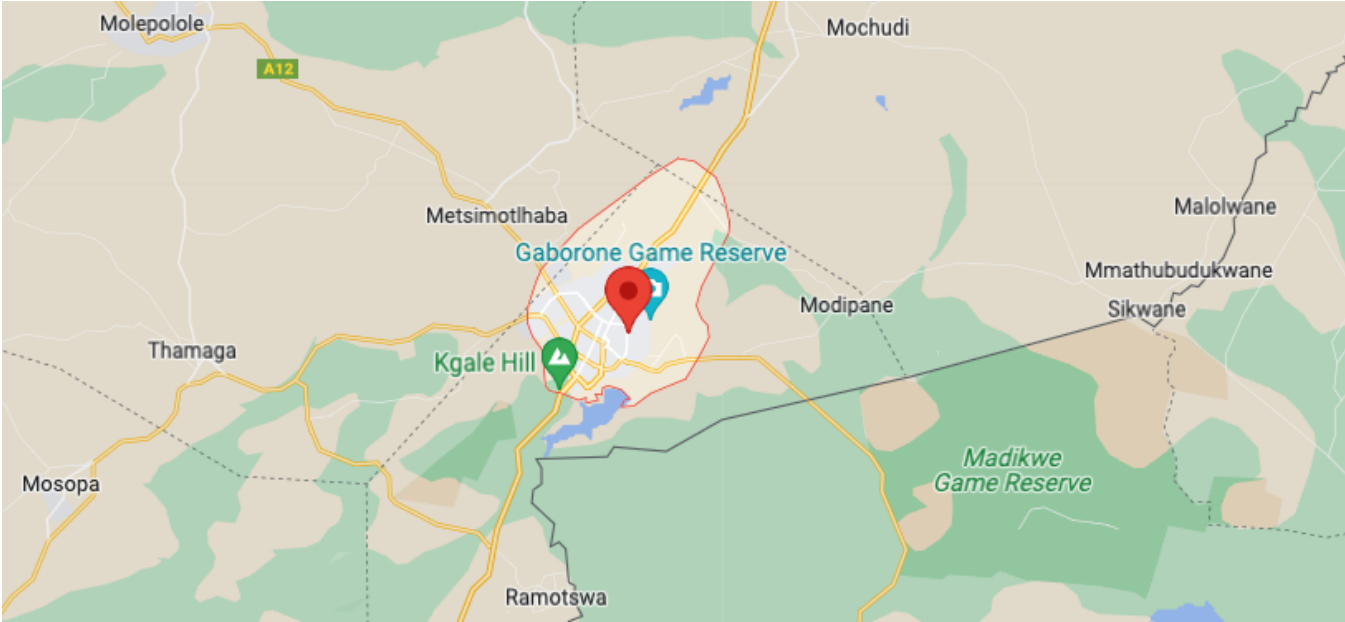


Figure 2. Gaborone, Botswana.

For more background on refugees in GABORONE and BOTSWANA, continue to the appendices. Base map imagery © Google 2022.

Executive Summary

This report focuses on Botswana's policies that impact refugees' and immigrants' mobility, employment opportunities, and education. Drawing from my own experiences as an immigrant and my interactions with refugees and immigrants in Botswana's capital, Gaborone City, I find that Botswana's policies differ from surrounding countries. South Africa, for example, which neighbors Botswana, allows its refugee and asylum-seeking individuals to mix with the general population as they are processed. In Botswana, in contrast, they are confined to the remotely located Dukwi Refugee Camp, over 500 kilometers away from Gaborone City.

Refugees in Botswana are also not allowed to work unless they are issued a work permit. This often results in fewer choices for capable refugees at the camp to care for themselves and their families and a greater responsibility for government and humanitarian organizations to sustain the refugee population. The few refugees who are allowed to work outside the camp under special permits as their status is processed must report periodically to Dukwi Camp. These check-ins serve as a constant reminder of their refugee status. They also present significant challenges as many refugees must travel long distances to reach Dukwi Camp.

Refugees in Botswana also face limited access to higher education. Botswana's government does not provide financial assistance to enable refugee students to pursue their university studies, and many end up back at Dukwi Camp. A recent positive change, however, is the collaboration between Skillshare, an online learning platform, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Also, a number of scholarships are being offered to deserving refugees to pursue their education in tertiary institutions. Although this is a step in the right direction, such assistance is not sufficient. Policies and resources to promote greater inclusion of refugee students in higher education are sorely needed.

Note on Terminology

Several local terms are used in this report. First, *makwerekwere* is a term that refers to foreign nationals (especially those from developing countries) in a derogatory manner. It is most frequently used in South Africa and countries surrounding it, including Botswana. The term *Batswana* and its singular form, *Motswana*, refer to people from Botswana. *Tertiary education* refers to post-secondary school education offered in universities, colleges, and other tertiary institutions often leading to professional certification.

Introduction

Forced migration brings many changes, such as loss of income, loss of property, and exposure to new cultural norms as migrants try to adapt to the host society. The disruption of education for school-aged individuals together with restrictions on the right to work are two of the most impactful. Education and employment opportunities for forced migrants usually depend on the host government's policies, with international organizations like the UNHCR and the Red Cross often filling in the gaps. Government policies can be life-altering, leading either to greater opportunities for migrants or acting as bottlenecks to their future and integration in the receiving country.

As one of the politically and economically stable countries in southern Africa, Botswana receives immigrants from across the continent, including Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, and Nigeria. Most migrants come seeking economic opportunities; however, some flee for their lives from their respective countries. According to the UNHCR, Botswana had more than 1,000 refugees in 2019 who resided in various parts of the country and were in different stages of processing. Refugees receive aid from the Office of the President, as well as humanitarian organizations like the UNHCR and the Red Cross.

Unlike in neighboring South Africa where refugees are free to mix with the general population as they are being processed, Botswana confines most refugees and asylum-seekers



Figure 3. Parliament of Botswana. Source: saiaa.org.za, 2022.

either at the Centre for Illegal Immigrants in Francistown, at the provincial capital, or in Dukwi Refugee Camp. This camp is in eastern Botswana, a two-hour drive from Francistown, and over 500 kilometers from the capital of Gaborone.¹ Dukwi Camp runs some educational facilities on-site, but these provide only basic education up to the secondary school level. For post-secondary education, refugee students have to fend for themselves, as they cannot access

the government sponsorship afforded to Botswana nationals. This means most refugee students are unable to attend tertiary education in Botswana. The government's policy also restricts employment for refugees, which results in refugees' dependency on handouts from the government and other aid agencies. For tertiary education, however, a welcome change has recently occurred, as a number of tertiary institutions have begun offering special scholarships to refugee students.

¹For more information about the Dukwi Refugee Camp, see Sunjic, M. (2004). Feature: Botswana camp captures history of southern Africa. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2004/2/403107e84/feature-botswana-camp-captures-history-southern-africa.html>.

In this report, I draw on my own experiences as a migrant pursuing graduate studies in Gaborone City and on conversations with other migrants and refugees. I start with the historical background of refugees in Botswana and the refugee policy environment. I then describe the different experiences of refugees and other immigrants. I seek to paint a picture as experienced and observed by myself and those I interacted with.

Author's Position in Gaborone

I was born in Malawi, which neighbors Botswana to the east, and first came to Botswana in 2010, when I was 25 years old. I am currently pursuing a Master of Philosophy in Sociology at the University of Botswana in Gaborone City. My research interests lie in migration, especially in southern Africa. Botswana has given me a chance to interact with immigrants from different backgrounds for ten years. As a migrant myself, I have the opportunity to be a confidant for some of these migrants about issues they don't freely share with others. This experience has provided me with a rich understanding of the daily lives of migrants in Gaborone.

Report

Country Context

Botswana is a signatory to several international instruments concerning the protection of refugees, including the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol, and the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention. In accordance with the 1951 Convention, Botswana enacted the Refugees (Recognition and Control) Act of 1968. The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status and other aspects concerning their protection (Ntseane & Mupedziwa, 2018).

Refugee movements into Botswana date back to the struggles for independence of countries around southern Africa. Dukwi Refugee Camp was originally a hiding place for pro-independence activists from



Figure 4. The 'Three Chiefs' Monument. Source: photo by author.

countries like Zambia, Namibia, Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), and those fighting apartheid in South Africa. This influx of refugees led to the establishment of Dukwi Refugee Camp by the Lutheran World Federation in 1978, and it officially marked the government's encampment policy. Dukwi Camp served as a shelter for liberation struggle activists to meet secretly and strategize. At its peak, the camp hosted more than 45,000 people, most of whom had fled oppression and racism in Zimbabwe and apartheid South Africa. Indeed, up until the

1980s, the majority of refugees and asylum seekers in Botswana were South Africans. From 2000 onwards, most refugees and asylum seekers in Botswana were fleeing the economic meltdown and political unrest in Zimbabwe. Botswana has also received refugees from the civil war in Angola (1975-2002) as well as Somalis, Namibians, Congolese, Mozambicans, and Eritreans.

Given its political stability, Botswana is a preferred destination for refugees from the region and beyond. The country was once called a "country of immigration" based on its policy of importing skilled migrants in the 1980s. At that time, Botswana was characterized by acceptance, openness, and positive attitudes towards non-citizens. This changed in the late 1990s as Botswana attitudes towards non-citizens began to shift as a result of high unemployment. Locals blamed immigrants for taking up their jobs, and foreigners were seen to be transferring too much money out of the country (Campbell and Oucho, 2003). In the 1990s, increasing numbers of undocumented migrants from Zimbabwe became a security concern for locals. These migrants came largely as a result of Zimbabwe's political and economic problems arising from late President Robert Mugabe's Economic Structural Adjustment Program in 1991.

Refugee Policy in Dukwi Refugee Camp

Unlike in South Africa where asylum seekers are free to fend for themselves, the government of Botswana practices a ‘confinement policy’ where registered refugees are required to live in Dukwi Refugee Camp. (One explanation given by the government for the confinement policy is that some refugees have military backgrounds and need processing before they can be permitted to leave the camp; however, this processing can take months to years.) The Office of the President of Botswana is directly responsible for the camp, and asylum seekers need permission to leave the camp for work or outside studies and cannot seek employment unless they receive a work permit.



Figure 5. Dukwi Camp. Source: reliefweb.int, 2022.

In Dukwi, most daily necessities are provided by the Botswana government and humanitarian organizations like the UNHCR. The Ministry of Health runs a camp-based clinic that provides primary care services (including reproductive health, treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, HIV prevention, voluntary counseling and testing, and family planning). There is a shortage of schoolteachers in the camp, despite there being refugees who are qualified to teach and who have paperwork to prove it, but do not possess official work permits.

Dukwi Refugee Camp is in a rural, remote setting. This makes it difficult for refugees to pursue economic activities and puts more demands on the state and humanitarian organizations (Macharia-Mokobi & Pfumorodze, 2013).

Work in Gaborone City

Many of the refugees employed in Gaborone City (after being given permission to leave Dukwi Refugee Camp) have professional qualifications or are artisans, as these are more likely to get employment. One such individual is Mukisa, a refugee from Uganda residing in Extension 14, a neighborhood in Gaborone City where I used to stay. He now works as a teacher in one of the private secondary schools. Mukisa and I usually meet at a local recreation center during weekends and talk about personal and general issues, including life at Dukwi Refugee Camp. He explained that, because he has worked and done everything according to the law for more than fifteen years, he expected to be fully processed by now; however, he is still required to report in person to Dukwi at regular intervals. During these call-ups, the government checks the progress of the refugees and renews their documentation, which may take up to a month. Mukisa voiced frustration about how disruptive this is to his life, especially with his finances: “I had to stay at the camp for almost a month and pay rent here [his residence in Gaborone City]. It is only because the principal at my school understands my situation, otherwise I could’ve been fired a long time ago.” These regular call-ups to Dukwi Camp for refugees

who are working outside the camp are constant reminders to Mukisa and others like him of their status as refugees and are a stumbling block to their integration process.

Reporting back to Dukwi Refugee Camp also is a concern for Irumba, a wood craftsman from Burundi residing in the Gabane area, west of Gaborone City. He has two children with a *Motswana* woman with whom he lives. I met Irumba when he teamed up with a Malawian friend of mine (also a wood craftsman) on a job in an area of Gaborone City called Partial. I went with my Malawian friend on these work trips and would chat with Irumba. He told me that he gets worried every time he has to go back to Dukwi, leaving his family behind: “I wish there could be another way of handling us. The trips to that side [Dukwi] are hectic.”² Irumba is sure, however, that the government will one day accept him as part of the society and no longer as a refugee; this keeps him going. He believes that the lives of his children will not be affected by his refugee status as their mother is a citizen of Botswana. One of his concerns is that the children will never have a chance to see and know their paternal relatives, as was the case with him when he was growing up in Burundi. Given the challenges and trauma Irumba faced in his home country, he wants to shield his children from this, noting, “I don’t want them to have anything to do with Burundi.” Yet, once again, he continues to lament that his children will likely never have the chance to see and know their paternal relatives.

Another immigrant I spoke with, Tinashe, is a 35-year-old from Mutare, Zimbabwe. He is a father of three children and has been in and out of Botswana since 2010. Tinashe is undocumented and has been deported back to Zimbabwe three times. He is a motor vehicle mechanic, based in the Tlokweng neighborhood in Gaborone City. I met Tinashe at his residence, where he also does his mechanic work. When asked why he doesn’t formalize his stay by processing a work and residence permit, he explained that he tried to do so on two occasions, but the applications were rejected. He eventually gave up. He stays with his wife who is also from Mutare, Zimbabwe. He confessed that despite the everyday possibility of meeting authorities and being sent back to Zimbabwe, his life in Botswana is worth it. Tinashe also emphasized how important education is to the future of his children: “My plan is to send the eldest child back to Zim (short for Zimbabwe) to do high school and college education there. Our education system is better than here and the chance of getting sponsorship for college is better back home.” Tinashe said he has been called *mukwerekwere* many times, especially when having a disagreement with a local. He recalled an incident where he was called a *mukwerekwere* by a *Motswana* mechanic who accused him of stealing his customers: “Customers come where they believe they will get the help they need; I do my job well and people hear of me and come. This guy came to me complaining that some of the people I help are his customers. But I didn’t go to people’s houses to advertise myself.”

Education Opportunities

Education for refugees and immigrants in Botswana is easier up to the secondary level, as they mingle with local kids and receive almost the same treatment. For people like Irumba, whose kids have one *Motswana* parent, they become citizens of the country and qualify for government scholarships after their secondary education. The same cannot be said of children of immigrants, such as Tinashe’s

² “Hectic” is an adjective commonly used across southern Africa to describe situations that are intense, frustrating, strange, bothersome - and generally, well, hectic! (note by Karen Jacobsen)

children, whose parents are both foreigners. They must find the means of financing tertiary education in Botswana.

Students attending primary school in Dukwi Refugee Camp are mostly 7 to 14 years old. The camp has one primary school run with help from UNHCR. The primary school includes year 1 to year 7, and students then go to junior secondary school. According to reports, the school lacks many basic necessities to operate as a standard primary school. There is an acute shortage of teachers at the school to cater to the number of students enrolled. This is despite the camp having qualified teachers ready to help. As discussed, the Botswana government does not allow any kind of employment for refugees without a permit. Based on his experiences in Dukwi, Mukisa, who is a teacher by profession, explained that the differences between the Dukwi primary school and other government schools are obvious, with a clear lack of resources and teachers: “I could have taught there already if they allowed me.” There are few teachers at the camp’s primary school and reports of corporal punishment by teachers are rife (UNHCR, 2005). The UNHCR has called on the government to ease restrictions placed on refugees and asylum seekers, which could go a long way in improving the quality of education at the Dukwi primary school.

A similar picture is seen when the learners go to secondary school, the last level before college or university. From Dukwi Junior Secondary School, students who qualify are sent to different secondary schools outside of the camp, based on performance and availability of space. There, many of the problems faced in junior secondary schools continue. Only a few schools, like Maruapula Private High School, offer scholarships to learners who do exceptionally well on their primary leaving examinations. Otherwise, under government policy, this is the last level where refugee learners can access free education. Most refugee students perform well but are stuck at Dukwi after successful completion of secondary school.

Tertiary Institutions in Gaborone

Refugee students are generally unable to pursue tertiary education. Most refugee parents cannot afford to pay for their children’s tuition, so students need sponsorship. In contrast, local students who attain the required minimum scores for further education automatically qualify for government sponsorship in tertiary institutions.

Dube (2019) highlights the case of a Zimbabwean refugee, Xolile Ngwenya, one of a select few refugee students who has secured government sponsorship to pursue higher education. Xolile scored 48 points (the highest a student can get) in her Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) examinations in 2017. Xolile is now a student of medicine at the University of Botswana under a university-funded scholarship. Dube notes, “the general feeling was that [the] government should start funding tertiary education for deserving refugees as well as offering them employment because they can be useful to the country.”

Some philanthropists, colleges, and universities like Botho University are now coming forward to help refugees at the camp, with encouragement from organizations like the UNHCR and Skillshare. In 2020, nine full scholarships for tertiary education were offered to refugee students by public and private institutions.

One of the beneficiaries (with whom I met and preferred to be anonymous) of a tertiary education scholarship is in his second year of studies at Botho University. He remained concerned that there are so many more refugee students in need of such help. In his high school class, there were many learners with potential who could have gone one with their studies if the situation was different:

“I am sure most of my colleagues did not have such a chance especially due to problems that we face at the camp, like lack of proper food and clothing, even proper light to study at night. I would ask more organizations and individuals to help improve the situation at the camp to help learners realize their full potential.”

There is still a huge demand for tertiary education from qualified refugee students in Botswana. The support of private organizations like Skillshare International and the tertiary institutions should be applauded, but broader support is needed from the Botswana government. Removal of current exclusionary policies by the government and further lobbying to get more tertiary institutions to provide different forms of support to refugee students to help them attend tertiary education could go a long way in changing the current situation for the better.



Figure 6. Class session at Botho University. Source: commons.wikimedia.org, 2022.

Conclusion

Even as support for tertiary education in Botswana starts to shift in a positive direction, much remains to be done to ensure that refugee students and those working are given opportunities across the board. The frequent need to report to Dukwi is a major disruption for refugees, especially those living in Gaborone City, which is far from the camp. If parents at the camp were allowed to work, they would be in a better position to support their families and provide for their children’s education needs. Similarly, the provision of financial help to deserving refugee students after senior secondary level could also offer an important opportunity for refugee students to attend tertiary education in Botswana and realize their full potential.

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Appendix A: Methods

In addition to conversations and personal encounters with refugees and immigrants in Gaborone City, I reviewed journal articles and policy documents that provide important insights into the lives of migrants in Gaborone City. I have tried to incorporate these perspectives in this report.

Appendix B: Refugees in Gaborone

Gaborone City, the capital and economic hub of the country, attracts many migrants—both documented and undocumented—and is where refugees released from Dukwi Refugee Camp come. The latter include refugees with permission to work and tertiary student refugees who have secured sponsorship for their studies. These refugees are mainly from Zimbabwe, Burundi, Uganda, and Namibia. Most Zimbabwean refugees are opposition members who fled persecution by the ruling ZANU-PF Party after the 2008 elections and were granted asylum by the Botswana government. Those from Namibia mostly fled the Caprivi conflict between the government of Namibia and the Caprivi Liberation Army in 1999, while Burundians and Ugandans were escaping the political unrest of the late 1980s and the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis until 2005. For more than ten years, I have had a chance to interact with some of these refugees and immigrants and hear their stories as I also found my way as a migrant student in the city.

About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Leir Institute for Migration and Human Security at The Fletcher School at Tufts University.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

About the Author



Felix Tapilira Chilumpha was born in Malawi and first came to Botswana in 2010. He is currently pursuing a Master of Philosophy in Sociology degree at the University of Botswana in Gaborone City, where his research interests center around migration in Southern Africa.
