

The impact of Migration on family functioning: Insights, perspectives and proposals.

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Presentation structure

1. Introduction
2. Brief overview
3. Some personal experiences (defining moments)
4. Four issues to bear in mind
5. Practical suggestions (some things to avoid)
6. Conclusion

#### Overview

The UN Department of Economics and Social Affairs has published a paper on "Major Trends Affecting Families". The paper identified several trends impacting on the family. These include: changes in the family structure, migration, demographic ageing and retirement, HIV/Aids pandemic and globalization. This presentation will focus on the impacts of migration on the family. Its aim is to sensitise people to the realities of migration and suggest possible means of managing them if migration presents itself as the option to be taken.

The presentation recognizes that Africa faces the greatest challenges when compared to other continents in relation to poverty, opportunities, war, diseases, basic infrastructure and standards of living (as defined by those in the developed countries).

Within this contextual reality, there is increasing pressure faced by well educated and highly mobile Africans who are faced with the unique challenge of having to make a choice between abandoning the continent of his/her birth or striving to make a living within it when a myriad of opportunities for relocation to more stable, economically advanced nations present themselves. This pressure is often driven by the desire aroused out of perceived better lifestyles offered in more developed countries.

The choice to relocate often has far reaching consequences on the family structure and is often accompanied by stresses which can have negative consequences such as family break-ups and unhappiness. These stresses and consequences are often not known at the time the decision to move to greener pastures are taken. The presentation will attempt to highlight some of these stresses.

Given that migration does take place and families do move, the presentation will further suggest possible options to manage the stresses associated with migration in order to minimize negative impacts on the family.

It is my humble view that ultimately it is the realisation of the purpose of our lives that gives meaning and joy to our lives rather than the promise of success offered by some of the relocation options available to us. It is also a worthwhile option to strive to contribute more to our countries development because only in this way will fewer of our people need to migrate for a better life.

## Some personal experiences that have impacted on my perspectives on migration.

### 1. As a student of Economics in 1982 (Two encounters)

My high school teacher, Mr Anderson and his baffling revelation that he would never like to go back to live in the UK.

Mr Anderson's encouragement to read "Small is beautiful" – A study of Economics as if people matter. This book suggested that people's fulfilment is far more important than the maximisation of production through economically optimal production arrangements.

### 2. As a student of Sociology in 1985

Fascinated by the concept of anomie (Breakdown in Human relations).

Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, introduced the concept of anomie in his book *The Division of Labor in Society*, published in 1893. He used anomie to describe a condition of deregulation that was occurring in society. This meant that rules on how people ought to behave with each other were breaking down and thus people did not know what to expect from one another. Anomie, simply defined, is a state where norms (expectations on behaviors) are confused, unclear or not present. It is normlessness, Durkheim felt, that led to deviant behavior.

Little did I know I would come to experience this anomie sooner than later and it would forever change my desire to want to live in a conventionally labelled developed country.

### 3. Experiencing anomie in Sweden.(3 Month stay in Sweden in 1987)

- Preconceived ideas about developed countries based on Pictures and my own preconception that the more developed a country, the happier people living there happen to be.
- Experiencing Anomie - People do not smile too much around here??, people do not seem too excited about life, there seems a certain sadness in the air?? I heard of stories of high suicide rates.
- Amazed by matter of fact approach to pornography, same sex relations, disregard for the family, order and social security for all, roads being washed with soap and water etc. I often wondered what were the norms of the society? The concept development seemed related to normlessness.
- My personal conclusion of participatory research experience in Sweden –
- **“If this is development then we do not want it in Africa”.**

### 4. Observations in North America (4 months in Canada in 1988)

- I met a young man by the name of Sammy. He was from Ethiopia. When he dropped me at the airport when I was leaving to go back home, his eyes grew moist and he wept at not being able to go back to his home despite his luxurious lifestyle. – I thought he was the luckiest young man alive with his fancy car, fine stereo system and wall to wall carpeted apartment.

## **5. 11 years in South Africa (Migrant)**

Objective was to study for 2 years, reality was 11 year adventure.

I learnt how people get stuck in a foreign country without planning for it (Planned to stay for 2 years ended up staying for 11 years)

Freedom at last after 350 years (Abortion debate, the big money spinner for Doctors).

The new found freedom has become as serious confusion that will take years to resolve.

Economic immigrants arrived from all over Africa (The Land of Milk and Honey).

It did not matter how long we stayed, we were always second class citizens.

Finally made the choice to leave due to the major conflict in values and the need to get back to our roots. Fortunately we had the choice. Many of our fellow Africans do not have the choice to return home.

### **Four issues to bear in mind**

1. The institution of the family is important for the good of society
2. Migration is here with us.
3. Migration impacts on the family in many ways (Negative and positive)
4. We need to manage the impacts of migration (Build on the positive, minimize the negative).

#### **1. The institution of the family is important for the good of society**

Generally this is given and I do not want to preach to the converted. The family is the basic building block of society. A healthy family means a healthy society

“Definition of the family is up for debate” extract from article published in the US

Lost amid the same-sex marriage debate dominating headlines these days is another fundamental, national institution facing a potential definition change: the family.

The traditional American family has long been defined as a married man and woman with a couple of children and maybe a dog or a cat.

But with the prevalence of divorce and go-it-alone parents -- not to mention the bevy of same-sex couples raising children -- the definition of what society constitutes as a "family" is in flux.

As in the marriage debate, many say a family can only exist with a man, a woman and, usually, children.

Others say that's too rigid a definition. They say a family can consist of any number of combinations: same-sex couples with children, unmarried couples with children, couples with stepchildren, single parents and children.

In my view the nuclear family plus the extended family plus the significant other relationships (I call this the double extended family which includes other family friends, non relative uncles and aunts, other peers we spend time growing up with in boarding schools, university, workplaces etc.) all make up the family.

Nb. As a migrant the family often reverts to the nuclear family and often the extended and the double extended family disappears from view.

## **2. Migration is here with us**

It is likely that all of us here have relatives and friends who have emigrated from the African continent. It is also likely that most of us have at some point in our lives considered the option of migration.

The issue is illustrated by a statement AND DIRE WARNING made by an official of the Economic Commission for Africa:

*Ainalem Tebeje*

"In 25 years, Africa will be empty of brains." That dire warning, from Dr Lalla Ben Barka of the UN [Economic Commission for Africa \(ECA\)](#), reflects the growing alarm over Africa's increasing exodus of human capital. Data on brain drain in Africa is scarce and inconsistent; however, statistics show a continent losing the very people it needs most for economic, social, scientific, and technological progress.

The ECA estimates that between 1960 and 1989, some 127,000 highly qualified African professionals left the continent. According to the [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#), Africa has been losing 20,000 professionals each year since 1990. This trend has sparked claims that the continent is dying a slow death from brain drain, and belated recognition by the United Nations that "emigration of African professionals to the West is one of the greatest obstacles to Africa's

### 3. Migration impacts on the family in many ways

Illustration of impact caused by separation of the family through migration.

#### **Migration and Social Crisis - Family relations under threat (Article)**

Studies have shown that overseas migration has precipitated a social crisis, affecting most especially the family. There are marital conflicts and breakdown of marital relations due to prolonged separation and lack of communication. Incidents of separation and abandonment are increasing. Intense loneliness, anxiety and pressure of child-rearing and domestic chores, are factors which contribute to emotional stress that affects the entire family.

Among children of migrant workers, incidents of drug abuse, delinquency, early pregnancies or marriages and child abuse are increasing. Children also manifest strong materialistic values as they become overly dependent on money and gifts from overseas. Sometimes, they become extravagant especially when opportunities are good. A strong motivation to go overseas is developed among children in the belief that overseas employment is the only solution to improve their lives.

Likewise, relations within the family and among relatives are affected. Thinking that migrant families are well-off, relatives turn to them for almost any financial need, whether for hospitalization of a relative, graduation of a cousin, wedding or even birthday of a neighbor. In the community, migrant families are often the topic of gossips concerning relationships and affairs of the separated spouses. Community conflicts arise as a result of jealousy. This is especially true where the neighborhood is not organized.

Yet, in the face of the problems caused by migration, many Africans continue to go overseas in droves. When asked why they or their spouses decided to seek overseas employment. The usual reply is "to keep the family" and improve our lives. This response is truly admirable. But the separation of the family, especially when prolonged and reunification is uncertain, has become the very reason for breakdown of marital relations and disintegration of the family.

Sadly, the solution sought to improve and keep the family becomes the cause of its disintegration, its dissolution.

#### **Impact on children and youth**

Most migrants come from young families, barely starting family life. Marital relations have not yet taken deep roots when fate already separates the young couple. Because the relationship has not yet matured, marital integrity becomes vulnerable especially during difficult times or crises situations. It is also sad to think that young children are separated from the parent, especially if the migrant is the mother.

Eventually family members look at their migrant fathers or parents as mere financier or provider of the family. Because the migrant parent also tries to make up for lost

time, they tend to compensate this with material blessings. This further emphasizes their role as providers.

#### **4. We need to manage the impacts of migration (Build on the positive, minimize the negative).**

I have to admit that with all the goodwill in the world to stay in ones country, many people will still eventually migrate seeking greener pastures. The Best they can do is thus manage the impacts of migration.

#### **Practical suggestions**

- Family get togethers with like minded families – These could involve children’s birthdays, Sunday afternoon picnics, Christmas get togethers occasional weekend camps etc.
- Be aware of the dominant values and guard your family against the negative values.
- IFFD designed First steps program in Johannesburg – Brought together likeminded couples to a first steps course on upbringing of young children.
- Worthwhile initiatives – Catalysed the formation of PAMP (People against mind pollution). Objective was to reduce the impunity with which advertisers used socially unacceptable messages to advertise their products. Riased our concerns with the Advertising standards authority of South Africa.
- Keeping in touch with relatives and friends at home. Annual visit at least during Christmas, emails, letters, cards etc. Out of sight but never out of mind.
- Involved in community activities eg. Sitting on school governing body really helped with integrating and getting to know more people, volunteering my time for the National peace secretariat and a local foundation.
- Maximise on the tremendous educational and progressive opportunities often found in may developed countries. Invest in yourself and your family in the process.

#### **Some don’t’s**

- Don’t split the family for sometime until things become better in the new country. Migrate together if possible.
- Don’t imagine travelling home is too expensive, plan for a home visit at least annually or else you will simply disconnect.
- Don’t lose pride in who you are and where you come from. A sense of belonging engenders confidence and purpose.
- Don’t ever say you will never return home if things become unbearable.
- Don’t be too busy to develop a network of friends and likeminded people and especially families.
- Don’t be too busy to contribute positively to your new society
- Don’t ever assume that it will always be greener on the other side because there will be challenges.

**Conclusion:**

The renaissance of our continent depends on the collective renaissance of the individuals who choose to remain on the continent. The option to migrate will no longer be viable for our children once the continent moves closer to its true potential.

We thus need to make our African countries viable places for us to live and places where our young people can get the income generating opportunities they need to make a living. We can do this by actively getting involved in politics, policy formulation, education and initiatives that contribute to the development of the continent. We also need to encourage our children to take an active interest in these pursuits that contribute to the greater good and in the incremental viability of our African countries.

We also need to encourage our children to develop a sense of pride in being who they are as Africans despite the lack of luxuries and the apparent glamour of more developed countries.

In conclusion: Lessons from the Geese

*On the lighter side: The lessons of the geese*

This fall, when you see geese heading south for the winter, flying along in the "V" formation, you might consider what science has discovered as to why they fly that way.

FACT: As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an "uplift" for the bird immediately following. By flying in the "V" formation, the whole flock has at least 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

LESSON: People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going more quickly and easily, because they are travelling on the thrust of one another.

FACT: When a goose flies out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone. It quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front of it.

LESSON: If we have as much common sense as a goose, we stay in formation with those headed where we want to go. We are willing to accept their help, and give our help to others. It is harder to do something alone than together.

FACT: When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into the formation, and another goose flies to the point position.

LESSON: It is sensible to take turns doing the hard and demanding tasks, and sharing leadership. As with geese, people are interdependent on each other's skills, capabilities, and unique arrangements of gifts, talents, or resources.

FACT: The geese flying in formation honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

LESSON: We need to make sure our honking is encouraging. In groups where there is encouragement, the production is much greater. The power of encouragement (to stand by one's heart or core values and encourage the heart and core of others,) is the quality of honking we seek. We need to make sure our honking is encouraging and not discouraging.

FACT: When a goose gets sick, wounded, or shot down, 2 other geese will drop out of formation with that goose and follow it down to lend help and protection. They stay with the fallen goose until it dies or is able to fly again. Then, they launch out on their own, or with another formation to catch up with their flock.

LESSON: If we have the sense of a goose, we will stand by our colleagues and each other in difficult times as well as in good!