Chapter 9
‘All That Glitters Is Not Gold’: Johannesburg and Migrant Access to Social Services

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Abstract South Africa is the economic powerhouse of Africa. Consequently the country has attracted large numbers of forced migrants particularly in the post-1994 period when the new democratically-elected government took over the reins of power. By 2003, an estimated 85,000 refugees and asylum seekers had found their way into the country, and the figures have continued to swell. While on paper the South African Constitution is inclusive in terms of access to social services, it would appear forced migrants residing in that country have been short-changed as the country seems to be sinking into the quick-sands of a new brand of “apartheid” – inequitable access to social services. Indeed while the pre-1994 apartheid system played out in the form of “(white) citizen against fellow (non-white) citizen”, the post-1994 form of ‘apartheid’ appears to be presenting in the form of “nationals versus non-nationals” often (irrespective of the citizenship status of the non-nationals) with the latter on the receiving end. Research has shown that the situation appears particularly desperate in the city of gold – Johannesburg. Many migrants that had been lured to this city by tales of abundant opportunities, have upon arrival in Johannesburg, to their disappointment, discovered that “all that glitters is not gold”. Indeed the forced migrants have quickly learnt that while Johannesburg may on the surface appear a glittering, cosmopolitan city full of opportunities for self improvement, there are, in fact, no easy “gold deposits” (in the form of greater employment and related opportunities) for the picking on the part of the average migrant. Indeed, all that is available – the forced migrants have belatedly discovered – are extremely difficult lifestyles predicated on the notion of “survival of the fittest”. Social services including health facilities, housing, education and social welfare, are not readily accessible. The paper examines the challenges associated with migrant access to social services in the city of Johannesburg in South Africa.

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9.1 Introduction

During the apartheid era, South Africa was a refugee-generating country; but since 1994, the country has essentially become a refugee-receiving destination. There is no doubt that the dismantling of the apartheid dispensation was accompanied by a new wave of immigration – in particular made up of forced migrants (i.e. refugees and asylum seekers) mainly from African countries. Consequently, the country as at 2003 was playing host to between 70,000 and 85,000 refugees and asylum seekers, and of this figure an estimated 53,000 were asylum seekers whose applications for refugee status had yet to be determined. The population of forced migrants in South Africa, who are largely urban based, was expected to have risen to around 100,000 by 2004 (UNHCR, 2002) – a development that, in the view of many, was bound to further strain the limited resources at the country’s disposal.

Forced migrants continue to enter South Africa in large numbers in the process of fleeing dangerous political situations and abuses in their home countries, and also in search of new socioeconomic opportunities. South Africa is one of a few democratic and socially and politically stable countries within the African continent. Unlike other African countries, South Africa does not employ encampment asylum policies and this policy does contribute towards making it a natural destination for many exiles, particularly those from urban environments. Encampment essentially involves placing refugees in settlements (camps) that are usually fenced off to restrict their movement. In many instances the camps would be situated in remote rural parts of a given host country, far away from social and economic life of the particular country, where they do not interact easily with the host population. This decision, ostensibly, is taken for their own safety. Encampment could be said to be the opposite of spontaneous settlement, which involves refugees settling wherever they please, among locals, within the given country. Thus South Africa has allowed refugees to self-settle, and the vast majority are based in urban, and not rural areas.

The relative economic wealth of South Africa strengthens its appeal as a land of milk and honey, an inaccurate image of course, which quickly wears off once the exiles become conscious of the harsh reality of trying to make a living in a foreign country (Moret et al., 2005: 43). The unprecedented influx of refugees and asylum seekers has created a major stress economically, socially and culturally for refugees and asylum seekers (flooding into the country) on the one hand, and sections of the host community on the other.

Many of the forced migrants hailed from countries to the north of South Africa that are among the major refugee-sending states on the continent, including the DRC, Angola, Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia. Apart from political migrants, thousands of economic migrants – both legal and illegal – have also swelled the country’s