



## The Burning Question: Where is the grass greener?



During the festive season of 2022, I came face to face with the question: to stay or not to stay? Given the context of a skilled engineer, working in the South African minerals industry, how does an individual make this decision?

The question around the security of our own infrastructure still hangs in the air. How will this impact our minerals industry's growth prospects? Reports are conflicting, some saying the minerals industry is in a downward spiral with its ninth consecutive month of decline in October 2022. Three top challenges always mentioned are erratic power supply and Transnet woes, both port and rail.

Other reports show that the industry's financial performance exceeded expectations: distributions to shareholders more than doubled, capital expenditure grew by more than 30%, taxes paid increased by more than 10%, and record commodity prices reached for the platinum group metals basket, iron ore, and coal.

Again, given the conflicting reports and the uncertainty around South African infrastructure, how do highly skilled individuals in the South African minerals industry make the decision: to stay or not to stay?

According to the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs, more than 914,000 South African citizens emigrated between 2015 and 2020, which is basically three times as many than in previous years. New World Immigration (Pty) Ltd statistics show that almost three quarters of enquiries come from highly skilled and qualified professionals, while 30% of applicants were tradesmen.

Data from across the globe shows more than 201 000 South Africans living in Australia at the end of 2021 (2 230 more than in 2020); Canada welcomed 25 000 South African citizens between 2015 and 2020; in just the first half of 2022, 11 300 South Africans had their New Zealand residency applications approved; the UK Home Office shows that between Q1 2020 and Q3 2021, more than 5 800 citizenship grants were awarded to South Africans; and in the USA, more than 650 South Africans obtained resident status in 2022 (more than 2 300 passing in 2021). According to a study commissioned by the Inclusive Society Institute during 2021, 11.13% of South Africans with higher education indicated that they were seriously considering emigrating within the next two years.

What is the impact of this 'brain drain' on the minerals industry?

During April 2022, the South African government announced plans to change its data collection systems to get a better idea of how many skilled South Africans are leaving the country. The proposal noted that the country has seen an outflow of valuable skills in several sectors. It added that the emigration of skilled South Africans has not been addressed efficiently through any specific policy and constitutes a growing problem in certain sectors. Various society leaders have expressed concern about the fact that those who emigrate make up a large part of South Africa's skilled labour.

Life-changing decisions are never easy and one might even believe that freedom lies in the absence of choice. Nonetheless, I want to make a plea for South Africa. Acknowledging that all is relative and highly dependent on the comparison made (for example: emerging countries or markets vs mature, established, first-world economies), South Africa is one of the countries with the lowest cost of living. For example: our consumer prices are 40% lower than in London, rent is 60%

## President's Corner *(continued)*

lower, dining out will cost you 50% less, and groceries prices are 30% lower than in London. Although our stringent labour law policies may challenge South African employers, they do give employees a high level of job security, ensuring fair treatment. South Africa also has lower costs of tertiary education and child care. Given the crippling health care challenges Britain faces (due to surging inflation coupled with almost 10 years of stagnant wage growth), I am thankful for our health care system. On the UHC index developed by the World Health Organization, comprising 14 tracer indicators, South Africa's score has almost doubled in the past 20 years, reaching 67 (on a scale of 0–100) in 2019.

Above and beyond all of this, I am thankful to be part of the SAIMM and for the support we give to our young professionals, entering our minerals industry, through our SAIMM-YPC. We focus on supporting scholars through career guidance, supporting them in mathematics, science, and tutoring in life skills. We also focus on our graduates, supporting them in selection processes and bridging the gap between theory (getting the degree) and practical execution in the industry. We continue our support with conferences on best practices, training, mentoring, and development programmes. The SAIMM is committed to influencing other bodies (for example ECSA) to the benefit of all stakeholders, especially our young professionals. Maybe most important of all, we support entrepreneurial activities that will serve the requirements of our young professionals.

Social comparison has its roots in evolution, it is a human condition, and I will continue comparing grass to determine where it is greener; therefore, I will come face to face again with the question: to stay or not to stay? I wish everyone wisdom in answering this question and wherever you might find yourself during 2023, I wish everyone a year of collaboration, growth, and development.

**Z. Botha**  
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