Catherine Traer Blog post 6: Field trip to Musina

I’ll only assess one of the articles that was assigned for the two days in Musina since I found there to be a lot to say about our experiences on the field. Bolt’s article talks about the trade activities in which migrant labourers take part in aside from their work on the farms. Important aspects of this reading include the benefits of living in a border farm worker’s compound and being contracted as a permanent worker. Because access to goods and services are limited on these compounds, certain workers develop their own personal businesses where they are able to provide exclusive services to the compound population. Bolt calls this ‘farm employment’ as opposed to legal or illegal ways of making a living. Most of these small businesses offer services on credit for their customers, and the owners collect their pay on the same day as pay day on the farm. This unavoidably leads to problems since some workers leave before they get to pay off their credit, and business owners don’t want to overreact and risk losing clientele. Moreover, the article presents the remittances that are purchased by farm workers in the days following receipt of their pay, and coincidently the arrival of huge markets to the farms. The article depicted an interesting facet of migrant labourers’ lives which is rarely discussed. The past two days in Musina were incredibly rewarding. I learned a lot about border farms and their employees, the workers compounds, as well as the Musina Mobile Clinic. I was really impressed with the Musina Mobile Clinic’s ability to keep the program going after MSF originally established it. I was also surprised to hear that the program had not encountered any supply and medicine shortages, even if they have the obligation to treat everyone who requests medical aid. Another fascinating fact about this program is this whole question of treating undocumented migrants. One of the sisters explained that they kept records of everything and everyone, and by doing that, they knew who they were treating and how to locate these people who are undocumented. I wonder if they greatly benefited from MSF’s expertise at the start, in terms of helping undocumented migrants and keeping records of these instances, and I would also be interested in knowing what challenges they’ve encountered since they started managing themselves after MSF’s departure. Nonetheless, it seems as though the mobile clinic has done amazing work and is an indispensable program in the area. I really enjoyed visiting the Maroi farm on Saturday, as we were able to visit the grounds and workers’ compounds, speak to the owners, as well as to some of the workers. I found it easier to relate the readings for the past two days to the field since we were able to see the conditions these workers worked and lived in. It was especially interesting to hear the owner’s firm opinion about South African workers as being lazy, as it is something we’ve been hearing or reading about quite often in the past few weeks. I also wasn’t aware of the BEE score regulations where companies with better BEE scores are subject to more benefits in terms of trade than those with lower BEE scores. In a country like South Africa, where apartheid is still so recent, I was extremely surprised to hear about this mechanism that serves to ‘ensure the success of the South African economy’. As the owner explained, Zimbabwean workers, who make up around 80-90% of his workforce, are considered to be ‘white workers’ in the BEE system, meaning that his farm does not receive a high score in terms of employment of black South African workers. I think that for industries like the farms around the borders, this quota of employing black South African workers should be reduced, since realistically and historically, more Zimbabweans have been filling these positions, and the demand from South Africans just hasn't been the same. Visiting these farms made me think about the migrant worker system that exists in Canada. There are a lot of Mexican foreigners who come to the country to work in farms and also Filipino women who come to work as domestic workers in the country. These are programs that Canada is very proud to have, although there has been significant backlash over the years about the treatment and conditions of these workers, it seems to generate a lot of interest from foreigners who apply. Looking at the case of South Africa, I wonder if such a program could benefit the migrants who often cross over the border dangerously and don’t have the required papers to find work. Also, I think this could perhaps help the problem associated with pensions not being able to cross-over borders once these workers want to retire. I wonder if a program like the one in Canada could also be beneficial to perhaps newer farms or farms looking to recruit new employees. Lastly, I have to mention how grateful I am to have been able to see the theatre group perform yesterday. I found their short sketch to be incredibly powerful, emotional and simply amazing. Leaving Musina makes me seriously rethink what I want to do after I graduate from my studies next year, in terms of what type of work I would like to be completing. Programs like the ones we saw in Musina clearly make a big difference in the lives of people living and working on the farms, and I can’t help but wonder what we can do as individuals to help steer policy in the direction of these people in order to keep these programs going.