

Changing the narrative about migrants in South Africa

By Tawanda Matema

The geopolitical context of South Africa has historically attracted increasing immigration (economic and labour migrants) with the discovery of the gold rand in the 19th century from countries like Zimbabwe and Lesotho, and displaced migrants due to conflict from countries like Somalia, Angola and the Democratic republic of Congo. This has continued to date but concurrently, the country also experiences emigration of its skilled population to more developed countries, an overlooked fact in migration discourses.

[The economic value of migrants to the South African economy is relatively high.](#)¹ According to the World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), migration is an important economic activity globally because immigrants contribute to labour markets, public finance and economic growth of their host countries. In South Africa, immigrants bring a diversity of skills, they create employment opportunities for themselves by establishing new businesses and they raise the government's fiscal balance because they are required to pay more in taxes according to the [OECD Development Centre](#).²

However, the post-apartheid experience has painted migrants in a negative light. Through the group 'Put South Africa First' and many others, the socio-economic argument that migrants steal South African jobs has been expanded to allege that African foreign nationals (particularly from Nigeria and Zimbabwe) are engaged in robberies, kidnappings, sex trade and human trafficking as well as drug peddling. Local South Africans also believe that there is an influx of migrants in South Africa that jeopardises their livelihoods. This has further fuelled migrant-local South African host tensions resulting in xenophobic violence manifesting in the form of looting and vandalism of foreign owned shops, assaults and killings of foreign nationals.

Violence against foreign nationals in South Africa is prevalent amongst the African black population of migrants and is perpetuated by the reluctance of South African political leaders to accept and speak out against xenophobia. The narrative at national level seems to indicate that these violent acts are criminal and not necessarily xenophobic or afro-phobic. In 2008, the state authorities took long to respond to the [xenophobic violence that claimed over 60 lives and left many more displaced](#).³ Similarly, violence against foreign nationals in 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020 and more recently in March 2021 in Durban has been explained as either criminal and or xenophobic.

¹ OECD and International Labour Organization, 'How Immigrants Contribute to South Africa's Economy,' OECD Development Centre, July 26, 2018, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/how-immigrants-contribute-to-south-africa-s-economy_9789264085398-en;jsessionid=33-glXS3KVD06S9SaK2tXy57.ip-10-240-5-98

² OECD and International Labour Organization, 'How Immigrants Contribute to South Africa's Economy,'

³ Henri Boshoff, 'Fears Over the South African Government's Response to the Xenophobia Crisis,' Institute of Security Studies, June 12, 2008, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/fears-over-the-south-african-governments-response-to-the-xenophobia-crisis>

Xenophobia is the most topical migration challenge in South Africa. While most South African locals and foreign nationals associate xenophobia with violence, it is in some cases difficult to determine if a particular violent act was merely criminal or xenophobic. Xenophobia is defined by [Declaration on Racism, Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance against Migrants and Trafficked Persons \(Teheran, 18 February 2001\)](#) as,

“attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity”.

This means that xenophobia can be present in the absence of violence because it is not just actions but also attitudes and perceptions.

However, migrants must not be vilified or perceived in a negative light because they too are human beings with human rights seeking a better life by migrating to South Africa. A [2016 Africa Check study](#) found that migrants from South Africa’s neighbouring countries were more competitive and considerably ahead in the semi-skilled category hence they had more chances of being employed in semi-skilled jobs. In most cases, undocumented migrants were willing to take precarious work that ordinary South Africans were not willing to take which is contrary to the misconception that foreign nationals steal South African Jobs. Additionally, there were an estimated total of around 2.9 million international migrants (including African, European and Asian migrants) at mid-year in 2020 which is around 4.8% of international migrant stock compared to the total South African population amounting to about 60 million people according to the [International Organization on Migration Statistics](#). Although the number may increase when considering undocumented migrants, it is still not as nearly enough as to be referred to as an influx. Furthermore, there is a need for more accurate capturing of migration data statistics.

Nevertheless, there are systemic challenges that continue to exacerbate the current tense situation between migrants and asylum seekers. Aside from abject poverty and misery, the (COVID-19) measures by the South African government have deepened the unequal treatment of migrants particularly asylum seekers and refugees. Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebisi have argued there is a lack of consideration of migrants in “economic, poverty, and hunger alleviation schemes” whereby this marginalized population is excluded.⁴

The pertinent question is, how can the narrative about migrants in South Africa be changed?

The first step to solving a problem is to identify, define and accept the existence of the said problem. Political leaders must be bold enough to take a step in speaking more positively or at least objectively about migrants. They must be responsible enough to accept that xenophobia is a reality in South Africa and work towards solving the problem with a focus on protecting and upholding human rights. This will set a good example, as people tend to follow the direction of their political leaders. For instance, an estimated 163 000 Asylum seekers

⁴Ferdinand C. Mukumbang, Anthony N. Ambe and Babatope O. Adebisi, ‘Unspoken inequality: how COVID-19 has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities of asylum-seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants in South Africa,’ *International Journal of Equity Health* 19, 141, 2020, <https://equityhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12939-020-01259-4#citeas>

have been waiting for decisions on their applications for years and others decades.⁵ According to SAnews, on March 8th 2021, the United Nations Refugee Agency and South African Home Affairs Department signed a milestone agreement to eliminate delays and backlog of asylum seeker applications,⁶ opening up space for more inclusion of migrants in South Africa. This is a commendable move by the government to positively change the treatment of migrants in general and asylum seekers more specifically. The government has demonstrated the political will to address the asylum seekers backlog by registering them onto the system.

Second, it is a common misconception that all migrants are the same, people must be informed, educated and made aware that migrants are not a homogenous group of people to be held in contempt. Broadly, migrants include refugees, asylum seekers, documented and undocumented migrants, as well as economic migrants to name a few. They must be referred to with respect using appropriate migration terminology such as documented or undocumented migrants rather than legal and illegal migrants and they must be afforded their due human rights.

Third, the media and civil society can help give migrants and locals neutral platforms to communicate with each other, openly talk about issues that are important to them and clarify misconceptions about each other. Additionally, the media can help reduce xenophobic tendencies by reporting positively on sensitive migration issues or even the positive work migrants are conducting in the communities they live in.

Last, migrants and their South African hosts must be afforded platforms to improve their relationships through cooperative projects that allow them to work together. It is important for both migrants and local South African hosts to engage in dialogues when they engage in cooperative projects that serve as networking platforms facilitating improvement of their personal and professional relationships. [The Migration Project](#) is an excellent illustration of an intervention aimed at changing the narrative about both migrants and local South Africans in the country. The Migration Project is co-funded by the European Union (EU) and implemented by the Democracy Development Program (DDP) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS).

The objective of the project is to improve community interrelationships and reduce conflict in KwaZulu-Natal through facilitating socio-economic cooperation between African migrants and local South African hosts. The project also aims to strengthen the capability of civil society organizations in lessening xenophobic tendencies among migrants and local South African hosts in KwaZulu Natal.

The longstanding migration narrative, [‘the kwerekwere are stealing our jobs’](#) in South Africa is built upon a host of misconceptions Informed by a general lack of understanding of migrants

⁵ Marvin Charles, ‘Home Affairs signs deal with UN refugee agency to deal with asylum seekers backlog,’ News24, March 22, 2021, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/home-affairs-signs-deal-with-un-refugee-agency-to-deal-with-asylum-seekers-backlog-20210322>

⁶ ‘Home Affairs signs agreement to deal with backlog of asylum seekers,’ SAnews, March 8, 2021, <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/home-affairs-signs-agreement-deal-backlog-asylum-seekers>

and migration issues, the absence of accurate and reliable migrant stock statistics, and a lack of awareness of migrant rights.

This narrative does not reflect the reality of the lived experiences of migrants in the country and xenophobic attacks have been the consequence thereof. What is needed is a change in the narrative focusing on reducing conflict and contributing towards improving socio-economic interrelationships between migrants and local South Africans from the grassroots level backed up by political support and an overarching democratic policy framework.

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