

Systemic shortcomings: Tackling xenophobia.

“This is not the first time Operation Dudula has infringed on people’s right to access health care which is a right enshrined in Section 27 of the country’s Constitution. Nor is it the first time that non-nationals have been scapegoated for the failures of the state to address challenges with service delivery and the critical state of many of the country’s key institutions.”

Collective Voices against Xenophobia

By Thelma Nyarhi and Paul Kariuki

South African socio-politics have become the buzz feed where migrants are concerned. Its reality can be located within the emergent in that it constantly is in a process of unfolding. There is a constant surfacing of concerns and questions. What is home? Who am I? Where am I from or where am I going? These are questions that surface time and again among people. Operation Dudula’s recent activities have had the distinctive effect of prompting uncomfortable existential questions. While the campaign’s mandate is concerned with ensuring service delivery to South African citizens, its approach questions the potential of humanity. The recent attacks on migrants seeking medical assistance at Jeppe Clinic or the extraction of migrant minors in classrooms in Diepsloot, Johannesburg highlights several issues. In the Jeppe clinic instance a migrant’s health was endangered moreover public health was also affected. In the Grade 1 migrant removals, children’s rights to education and safety were compromised. Both migrant removal instances challenge the constitutional affordances enshrined in Section 27 and Section 29 respectively.

Migrants often find themselves vulnerable to being singled out by the operation’s compatriots on grounds of taking away opportunities meant for citizen’s access to service delivery. They have been made scapegoats for various public service delivery systems which are in crisis, a diversion from the governing challenges of those sectors. Their experiences reflect not only the trappings of their lives but also the realities of the citizens. We are therefore able to unveil the various precarious elements unfolding within the hosting grounds. These may include injustice, instability, deprivation, and conflict among others. These are essential to trace as

they not only destabilize the peace to exist as a South African citizen or migrant but also probe questions around their triggers within society.

What are the triggers?

Within South Africa, migrants are a constant 'zone of suffering' where uncertainty embeds itself. In this section we discuss the systemic shortcomings that subsequently fuel the ongoing strife. By definition, misinformation is not the true reflection of reality. It occurs when people take on dangerous incorrect beliefs and see them as truth. Misinformation differs from disinformation in that it attributes to false information whereas the latter encapsulates the deliberate use of false information in misleading ways. Within South Africa and most political systems, the former applies. As a political construct, misinformation continues to infiltrate political systems and distort people's views on 'politics, science and medicine'. While Coronavirus COVID-19 probed conversations around misinformation on its modes of transmission and resultant panics and politics, we can draw lessons from it. The idea of 'fake news' or hoax intent is not new to South Africa. Within the COVID-19 climate, they have been met with harsh mitigation laws so as to control and end their spread and effects. The leading effect is usually panic and through it, irreversible consequences may arise.

In the COVID-19 transmission example, misinformation targeting the Asian community had resulted in Anti-Asian perceptions rendering them othered and marginalized. Here we see how perceptions can influence the attitudes and behaviours of people. The same can be attributed to migration knowledge. Misinformation targeting African migrants has resulted in the marginalization of migrants. Within these zones of marginality, migrants have been branded as the main cause of high levels of unemployment, criminal activity, and poor public service. There is no statistical evidence to show correlations to these claims and yet they are scapegoated. The effects of these are seen in the compounding anti-migrant perspectives that result in violent outbursts or force against the migrant community. 'They are taking our jobs and depleting our welfare budget', the citizen chants. Here we see how misinformation is birthed from an idea of fear.

"People react to fear, not love. They don't teach that in Sunday school, but it's true".

Richard Nixon, 1975

Whether it is establishing particular beliefs within society or implementing policy ideas, fear is used. As a primal emotion, fear is used as a propaganda tool. Notably the reinforcement of false beliefs or misinformed ideas can impact the framing of policy agenda. We see this in the South African context where Zimbabwean migrants have received the raw end of the stick and have been forced into repatriation. According to Corey Robin's analysis of fear in politics, fear operates in two ways. Firstly, politicians define and decide society's object of fear. Though indirectly pointed out comments such as 'All countries need to take responsibility for their citizens' by the Chairperson of the ANC subcommittee on International Relations, Lindiwe Zulu or Gayton McKenzie's (leader of Patriotic Alliance) comments on 'illegal foreigners' being responsible for the sale of "expired goods" in Eldorado Park late last year, these comments leave the common citizen free to their own conclusions. Secondly, political fear can also arise from those in power be it social, political, or economic. Of importance is the first that surfaces in nationalist and populist discussions.

Nationalism has been exploited by populist politicians for chauvinistic gains, xenophobic or racist projects. Populism and nationalism are intimately connected. Their visibility became more pronounced during the former United States of America, President Donald Trump's office term. Nationalism often rides on the reinforcement of reactionary views thus at times enforcing negative perceptions. Although both invoke people, they work in differing ways. Nationalism probes the homogeneity and notions of 'people as a nation' whereas populism emphasizes the centralization of the people against elite. Populism, therefore, pushes the agenda of 'the people' based on their social status and nationality. To begin with it is essential to understand the governing strategies within South Africa before looking into correcting the instability observed within society. In making the case of governance, South Africa shares the spotlight in populist and nationalist conversations. Believed to be a constitutional democratic government, it begets debates around constitutional mandates around migration. What is the point of a migration policy that offers promises of human rights to health, safety, or education when reality paints otherwise? Who are the people it serves? Migrants on top of uncertainties that describe their lives, are faced with fear for their safety in South Africa, a place they wish to call home.

What can be done?

In addition to the topic of triggers, corrective efforts feature not only the different mitigation strategies to be employed but also call upon dominant voices in power to intervene. Just as in the COVID-19 instance that saw various political voices and those in power demystifying circling misinformed ideas about the virus, the same energy must be applied in migrant politics. Through these debunking acts, migrants can live to exist. Furthermore, by accepting our incompleteness in nature we may begin to accommodate those different from us. Difference nudges change. It is that accommodation of difference that can offer futures of complementary co-existence.

Ends.

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