



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

SOUTH AFRICA'S IMMIGRATION DEBATE: BETWEEN REALITY, RHETORIC AND RESPONSIBILITY

South Africa's immigration debate is once again intensifying. It is emotive, politically charged and increasingly playing out at community level in ways that risk undermining social cohesion. Yet, for all the noise, there is still a lack of clarity in how the issue is framed and understood.

There are two lenses through which this debate must be approached.

The first being the imperative of safeguarding social cohesion, because South Africa is a society already under strain, with low levels of trust between communities and institutions. Any issue that further erodes trust must be handled with care, evidence and responsibility. The second lens is a distinction that is often deliberately blurred: that between legal and illegal immigration. South Africa, like any functioning economy, benefits from orderly, rules-based migration. There is no inherent problem with legal immigration. The current tensions are rooted far more in the perception, and in many cases the lived reality, of widespread illegal immigration, which places pressure on public resources, undermines the rule of law, and fuels frustration among already vulnerable communities.

If one is to understand why these tensions are resurfacing, one must start with the structural realities. South Africa's unemployment crisis remains the central fault line. Where jobs are scarce and economic inclusion is limited, competition becomes personal, because it is experienced not in abstract economic terms, but in the daily struggle for work, for income, and for access to basic services. In such an environment, the presence of undocumented migrants is often interpreted through a zero-sum lens: if they are here, it must be at the expense of someone else. Whether always accurate or not, that perception is powerful, and perceptions, in politics, often matter as much as facts.

This economic pressure is then amplified by political dynamics. Immigration has become a convenient mobilising tool. It speaks directly to the frustrations of the poor and unemployed, and it allows complex systemic failures to be reduced to more immediate and emotionally resonant explanations.

On the one hand, opposition actors frame illegal immigration as a primary cause of unemployment. On the other, elements within government have, at times, leaned on the same narrative to deflect from shortcomings in service delivery. The result is a convergence of rhetoric from opposite ends of the political spectrum, reinforcing the same underlying grievance.

Compounding this is a broader blame game. Government points to business, accusing employers of hiring undocumented workers and thereby fuelling the problem. There is truth in the need for employer compliance. But this argument cannot obscure a more fundamental point: it is the responsibility of the state to enforce the law. Border control, documentation systems and labour regulation fall squarely within the mandate of government. Where these systems are weak or inconsistently applied, space is created not only for unlawful practices, but for political opportunism.

Perhaps most concerning is the absence of credible and widely accepted empirical data on the scale of illegal immigration and in this vacuum, public discourse becomes untethered from evidence, where numbers are inflated, downplayed or simply invented, depending on the narrative being advanced. This uncertainty fuels both fear and denial. It prevents proportionate policy responses and allows tensions to escalate in an environment where no one quite agrees on the facts.

Against this backdrop, it is important to be honest about South Africa's track record. The country has not, to date, dealt with the issue in a sufficiently concrete and sustained manner in that responses have largely been reactive, focused on containing flare-ups, rather than addressing underlying drivers. They have, at times, stabilised situations in the short term, but have not prevented recurrence. What, then, is to be done?

International experience offers guidance, but it must be applied with realism. There is no quick fix. However, where tensions have been managed more effectively, three elements tend to be present: credible enforcement of immigration and labour laws, efforts to reduce economic exclusion, and sustained initiatives to rebuild social trust. The challenge in South Africa is not a lack of awareness of these principles, but a lack of consistent implementation.

In the immediate term, the priority of the authorities must be to restore credibility through visible and coordinated action.

First, government must establish a credible empirical baseline on illegal immigration. This is non-negotiable. Without reliable data, policy remains reactive and public trust continues to erode. The debate cannot be allowed to operate in a vacuum of facts.

Second, labour law enforcement must be strengthened significantly. Employers who knowingly employ undocumented migrants must face real and visible consequences. This is not about punitive excess, but about correcting incentives. Where there is no realistic prospect of unlawful employment, irregular migration pressures diminish. Importantly, enforcement must be seen to be happening. Transparency matters, not only as a deterrent, but as a signal to the public that the rule of law is being upheld.

Third, Home Affairs must be capacitated and held accountable for documentation, compliance and consequence management. This includes improving administrative systems and addressing backlogs, but also ensuring that violations are dealt with consistently. Border management must also be strengthened, and here technology offers practical opportunities. The use of modern surveillance tools, including drones, can significantly enhance monitoring capacity in the short term.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, the current siloed approach within government must be addressed. Home Affairs, the Department of Employment and Labour and the South African Police Service are operating in parallel, rather than in concert. This fragmentation undermines effectiveness. What is required is a genuinely integrated, whole-of-government response, where information is shared, enforcement is coordinated, and accountability is clear.

None of this will be easy. And none of it will yield immediate political dividends. But the alternative, continued drift, politicisation and erosion of trust, is far more costly.

South Africa does not have the luxury of getting this wrong. Immigration, if managed properly, can be part of the country's growth story. If mismanaged, it becomes a fault line that deepens division and undermines stability.

The choice, ultimately, is not between being “for” or “against” immigration. It is between governing it responsibly or allowing it to become a source of ongoing social fracture.

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