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Op-ed

***The need for an evidence-based response to addressing Xenophobia in South Africa.
The importance of addressing the real drivers of Xenophobia and Xenophobic violence.***

By Melanie Lue

Debunking myths and misinformation are key to developing an effective response to addressing xenophobia in South Africa, but this needs to be accompanied by strategies that address the drivers of xenophobic violence.

Xenophobia is defined in the *National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance* as an attitudinal orientation / hostility towards international migrants. Xenophobia manifests in different ways – the most visible being violence.

Research findings paint a dim view of the myths and attitudes the majority of the population holds towards international immigrants, but what is even more disturbing are findings of increasing levels of participation in anti-immigrant violence and support for vigilantism.

Research findings and population data have dispelled myths informing xenophobic attitudes towards international migrants. Findings of public opinion surveys conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) since 2003 reveal that the majority of the population believe that international migrants are responsible for the country's socio-economic problems. Half the adult population think there are between 17 - 40 million international migrants in the country. However, mid-year population estimates for 2022 indicate there are only 3.98 million foreign born persons in South Africa. The term 'foreign' includes not only migrants but people who have moved to South Africa legally and have become South Africans over time; people with work permits and study permits; documented migrants; unaccompanied minors; and asylum seekers / refugees.

Another inaccuracy perpetuated is that migrants are 'stealing jobs'. The facts paint another picture – migrants have a long-standing employment record in South Africa and have been found to contribute to the economy as indicated in a World Bank Study which found that for every employed migrant, he/she creates jobs for two South Africans. Research further indicates that migrants work primarily in the informal sector which according to Statistics SA is highest in non-metros (notable the Eastern Cape at 66.3 percent; Free State at 71.8, KZN at 65.5 and even Mpumalanga at 62.7 and Limpopo at 64 percent). This debunks claims that certain sectors are overwhelmed by foreigners.

A main contributor to anti-immigrant sentiment is misinformation and the irresponsible diffusion of information by people in positions of leadership. This accompanied by the failure to make use of official statistics when commenting on xenophobic and immigration issues, or informing decision making, planning and policy development have resulted in perpetuation of untruths.

However, whilst addressing attitudes and tackling the issue of scapegoating and xenophobic mobilisation is necessary, strategies need to be accompanied by interventions to address the drivers of xenophobic violence. Research documenting outbreaks of xenophobic violence indicate that

violence does not occur everywhere. There is anti-immigrant sentiment but in pockets where there is contested authority, the absence of stable institutions capable of resolving conflict, and inadequate policing responses. Interventions, it is argued need to be reframed to tackle the drivers of xenophobic violence. Ironically, the concerns of those community leaders and groups leading xenophobic violence are framed around social justice issues – inequality, violence, economic insecurity, inflation. Xenophobic violence is not an immigration issue, but about ‘gangster government’ – the way vigilantes have taken over the law. The drivers of xenophobic violence need to be addressed: poor governance, unemployment, etcetera.

Issues of xenophobia cannot, it is argued, be sealed off from the wider climate of a very fragile status quo. Research conducted by the HSRC has found a substantial decline in public trust in key institutions, the police, national government, parliament, and local government. Systemic levels of corruption and poor governance extend to the management of migration and treatment of foreign immigrants. Discriminatory practices in policing of international migrants manifest as a dual phenomenon of over policing (with migrants seen as soft targets by law enforcement) and under policing (withholding of services). This can be attributed to attitudinal issues, corruption, inadequate training which compounded by the failure of early warning systems and crime intelligence. The police have yet to effectively implement recommendations to address xenophobic violence of more than a decade ago and develop an effective strategies to deal with xenophobic violence.

Xenophobia threatens the foundation of South Africa’s constitutional values of equality and human dignity and poses a real threat to the country’s developmental agenda. Scapegoating issues of unemployment, crime, and poverty by blaming international migrants is dangerous and counterproductive. Growing populism and national chauvinism results in intolerance and hatred for anyone who is not South African. This is not good for South Africa – not only does it violate international and continental human rights obligations but rebuffs regional trade and cooperation agreements which are key to South Africa’s prosperity.

The pending review of the *National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance Plan* provides Government with an opportunity to reframe its approach and to develop evidence-based strategies to address the drivers of xenophobia and xenophobic violence.

There is an urgent need to address the disjuncture in responses by government leaders, policy and legislation across government. South Africa is signatory to the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees which provide a benchmark in terms of migration and refugee management. These and other international and continental human rights instruments provide guidance which should inform policy making at all spheres of government.

Chapter Nine institutions need to hold government accountable for lack of implementation of previous findings and recommendations on xenophobia, and poor compliance with international standards. And the broadcast media, television, radio and social media are key instruments as sources of information and disinformation. The media can play an important role in disseminating accurate data, debunking myths and delivering effective communication and education programmes.

It would be incorrect to label South Africa as a xenophobic society – only a third of the adult population harbour extremely negative views of international migrants. But left unchecked xenophobic attitudes and violence even by a few, can derail South Africa’s fragile democracy.

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