

Foreign Voices



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In the aftermaths of the xenophobic violence in South Africa: How can South African cities respond?

The eruption of xenophobic attacks in South African cities in May 2008 has shifted much international attention to the issue of governance of migration in South Africa and its obvious shortcomings. While the domestic authorities have proven to be unprepared for this event to happen, international observers have been taken by surprise by the scale of violence. An analysis of the political failures can help to enable South African cities in countering xenophobia among their residents in the future. Dr Aurelia Wa Kabwe-Segatti from the Forced Migration Studies Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, was a speaker at the Berlin Summer Dialogue 2008 on "Migration, Urbanisation and Development" that took place on 4 - 5 September 2008.

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intolerance are long-term battles to be fought“**



The tragic attacks against foreigners that have taken place in most South African cities in May 2008 have had one positive outcome: they have pinpointed the inadequacy and unpreparedness of South African local and national authorities in such a blatant way that the issue has now

moved up a few notches on the South African political agenda. Although neither the attacks, nor the unpreparedness were really new to those working on migration issues, their scope, intensity and aftermaths have opened space for an overall assessment of mechanisms in place and of the root causes of this specific type of violence as well as for advocacy and reform. This paper is an attempt at giving an overview of the general context, which has led to the May situation, and at clarifying what the major challenges are for South African local government structures in particular. It ends up with some suggestions of avenues to be explored for medium to longer term improvements.

1. Major changes and new, tenacious myths

Within just over a decade, South Africa has turned from a refugee generating country to a regional magnet for both economic migrants and asylum seekers. However, international migration to South Africa is poorly understood and often confused, in terms of consequences, with broader structural issues. Firstly, this major change in its demographic flows and composition has been largely overstated and discussed publicly using highly debatable baseline arguments (in the mid-1990s, certain academics would claim that there were 12 million undocumented migrants out of 47 million inhabitants). Closer scrutiny of international migration to South Africa debunks the widespread myth of an “invasion of hordes of Zimbabweans” or of a “human tsunami” comparable to what was observed, for instance, in the Great Lakes region after the Rwandan genocide. According to a recent study for the Gauteng Province, and despite policy perceptions to the contrary, foreign-born persons accounted for only 2.4% of the total Province population in 2001. Even taking into account the more recent influx of undocumented Zimbabwean migrants, it is highly unlikely that international migration can be held responsible for the major demographic changes observed in South Africa’s urban centres, which are by and large the results of domestic dynamics.

Secondly, migration is extremely contrasted across the territory with most provinces losing people and the two economic engines of the country, Gauteng (Johannesburg-Pretoria) and the Western Cape, drawing most internal and international migrants. Even within provinces, situations vary enormously with areas almost unaffected and others where international and internal migrants are probably in the majority, such as downtown Johannesburg for instance where the proportion of populations of foreign origin is (at worst!) comparable to cities such as London or Toronto.

Thirdly, South African xenophobic expressions are markedly different from other historical immigration regions like Western Europe or the United States. Despite an absence of overt politicisation over the migration issue – as a result of a general lack of political competition in a country where the African National Congress (ANC) has won electoral majority repeatedly since 1994 and absolute majority since 1999 – xenophobia is both deeply entrenched and extremely widespread. Its prevalence among all categories of South Africans and along very conservative, not to say overtly intolerant lines, has been documented by numerous opinion polls since the late 1990s. These negative perceptions of foreigners in general and African foreigners in particular, have recurrently led to violent manifestations that have grown in intensity and scope since the early 1990s and exponentially in the past two years or so. Unemployed people or hawkers’ associations have mobilised for marches against foreigners, cases of assaults against foreign shopkeepers (of Somalian origin in particular) in the townships are reported almost weekly, and heinous mobs frequently expel foreigners (as well as South Africans of “dubious” origin such as Vendas and Shangaans) from specific neighbourhoods. Numerous fatalities, of at least dozens of people, were recorded since the early 1990s and the May 2008 attacks alone have claimed the lives of 62 people, including 22 South African citizens and caused the internal displacement of at least a hundred thousand.

With a sharp increase in inequalities and a structural unemployment between 30 to 40% fourteen years after the end of apartheid, an education system that inadequately prepares the youth to enter the job market and difficult access to basic social services for the poor, South Africa offers a combination of structural factors which, where concentrated in specific areas, triggers extremely volatile situations. In that context, not only has state response been lacking, as we shall see next, but its absence or its orientation have sometimes encouraged the entrenchment of xenophobic sentiments. This prevalent popular dislike of foreigners has led to a situation where, following the May attacks, NGOs are trapped in publicly harnessing their intervention in favour of migrants and refugees to broader humanitarian or poverty alleviation issues for fear of being accused of favouring foreigners over poor South Africans.

2. The challenges of state responses: a national policy to be delivered locally

In this context, the South African migration policy response has varied from sticking to a conservative, Apartheid-inherited vision of migration containment to the adoption of a progressive legislative framework for refugees. This incapacity to adhere to a fully progressive thrust that would break away from a control-based vision and promote migration as a development tool for the region has been the trademark of the post-Apartheid migration policy. This tension has resulted in three specific aspects: an almost unchanged regime of labour migration to the mines and the commercial farming sector and a tendency to favour skilled immigration in a region rife with political instability and underdevelopment; an overemphasis on border control and repatriation resulting in vast public expenditures in this area and third, the cumbersome setting up of a first-class refugee regime with third world means and contradictory perceptions of refugees as economic, and therefore illegitimate, migrants in disguise. By and large, the post-1994 migration agenda in South Africa has been torn between three almost exclusive sets of interests: those of the private sector preoccupied with keeping an easy access to cheap and qualified sources of labour without bearing the costs of its reproduction; those of a State and its functionaries, obsessed with security and control, perceptions that were to be heightened in the post-9/11 context; and popular constituencies, sometimes encouraged by local politicians, overtly hostile to foreigners as threats to economic development.

The first shortcoming of this has been a lack of pragmatic policy implementation, in terms of staff training and capacity-building within the main government department in charge, Home Affairs, and an almost complete lack of anticipation on the challenges to be faced sooner or later by local government. The Green and White Papers on International Migration published in the late 1990s thus made almost no mention of the role to be played by local communities, except interestingly to "combat xenophobia". Instead of being envisaged as a challenge but also as a tool for a more balanced regional development, human mobility has consistently been painted negatively, especially at the local level where migration policy has been considered as the bulwark against influx.

Secondly, quality data collection and evidence-based policy-making have been neglected. This is due to the cruel lack of such resources (there is for instance not a single demographer specialising in migration issues at the national statistical institute of South Africa), with the bulk of Home Affairs resources year after year being mobilised on arrests, deportation and litigation with NGOs. There might also be, although this would require more substantial evidence, a question of denial and overconfidence in the inclusive nature of the South African nation-building and reconciliation processes. Interestingly, whereas Europe and North America have all allocated substantial chunks of their State budgets to migrants' integration and to social cohesion plans, the South African Government has only (re)discovered the notion of social cohesion in relation with foreign immigration in the aftermaths of the May 2008 xenophobic attacks.

Lastly, it is the entire post-1994 local government and decentralisation reform that should be appraised in light of the violence expressed against foreigners. As empirically ground evidence is beginning to document very neatly, the municipal proportional representation system is not proving extremely efficient in promoting service delivery and accountability. In a number of instances, ward committees and their leaders have either promoted the violence without the majority party being in a position to control its masses on the ground or have been toppled by groups of uncontrollable elements, reviving the worst instances of vigilantism under the guise of a nostalgia for an order inherited from anti-Apartheid struggle. This is revealing of the current political divisions at play in the South African political arena in reaction to a now defunct Mbeki administration, which has promoted highly laudable commitments to a culture of human rights and democracy without ensuring these commitments were meaningful and actually owned by people on the ground.

3. From Rainbow nation to rainbow communities?

South Africa has a historically appalling record of institutional racism and segregation but an exceptional experience in reconciliation that it has intended to export worldwide, and with some success on the African continent. Its current leniency towards xenophobia and intolerance (no resignation has been handed in and no major court case against perpetrators has taken place to date) could unfortunately question that ambition. It therefore needs all possible international experience and support in order to implement the resolutions adopted in the 19 August 2008 Declaration of the Social Dialogue on the Promotion of Tolerance through Diversity.

This may include:

- monitoring the inclusion of issues such as international migration and education to tolerance and diversity in all municipal policy documents and debates;
- encouraging South African political leaders to vigorously condemn xenophobic acts;
- exchanging best practices in terms of policing and judicial treatment of xenophobic acts to prevent the installation of a sense of impunity;
- supporting local long-term initiatives to educate children and local leaders to fight xenophobia, racism and intolerance;
- supporting initiatives at municipal level and across the country to train and hire staff that will specialise in the urban planning of human mobility;
- supporting the creation of intergovernmental bodies in charge of data collection and research in order to capitalise on the developmental dimensions of migration;
- and supporting the setting up of early warning mechanisms among communities, in collaboration with local State and civil society stakeholders, to ensure the protection of populations.

As anywhere else, xenophobia, racism and related intolerance are long-term battles to be fought and it is essential that the issue be envisaged as such and not as short-term bilateral cooperation goals by the international community.

Imprint

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