




# Dynamics informing xenophobia and leadership response in South Africa



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**Orientation:** The research addressed the issue of leadership response to xenophobia in South Africa that has a unique characteristic of being 'black on black'.

**Research purpose:** The research purpose was to assess the dynamics informing xenophobia in South Africa, leadership responses and systemic lessons thereon.

**Motivation for the study:** The first black president, the late Nelson Mandela, put in place a Constitution that has an intent to protect all stakeholders in a non-racist, non-sexist and without discrimination based on colour or creed. This pleasantness and warm welcome attracted a large influx of immigrants from across the continent and South Asia who come as international students, skilled professionals and economic refugees. This migratory pattern has led to protracted conflict between immigrants from Africa and indigenous black South Africans.

**Research design, approach and method:** A qualitative, exploratory research that drew data from the semi-structured interviews was carried out. Seven participants were purposefully sampled based on their involvement with the xenophobic affairs in their line of work. Content analysis augmented the primary data.

**Main findings:** The findings of this research showed that xenophobia is a consequence of the socio-economic environment in South Africa and that the leadership response shaped the public opinion on the phenomenon.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The research informed all South Africans, policy-makers and leadership in government on the consequences of xenophobia on the growth and image of the country.

**Contribution/value-add:** This article contributed to the current efforts by leadership in both government and civil society towards addressing the socio-economic issues that fuel xenophobia.

**Keywords:** xenophobia; leadership; social complexity; immigrants; emerging economies.

## Introduction

During the 1890s, South Africa depended on migrant mine workers from as far as Malawi (Mitchell 2013).

At the advent of independence in 1994, South Africa has continued to accommodate an influx of immigrants from the continent and from the South Asian countries like Pakistan and India, as refugees and economic migrants escaping conflicted areas (Oluwaseun & Olusola 2014). However, this migratory pattern has led to protracted conflict between immigrants from Africa and indigenous black South Africans. According to the South African Human Rights Commission Report (2010), these conflicts have resulted in brutal murders, burning of houses, looting of foreign-owned businesses and various acts of aggression from locals. Most migrants are attracted to the availability of economic opportunities, particularly in the informal sector (Chimbga & Meier 2014).

The growing presence of anti-foreigner sentiments amongst South Africans, mostly those living in the metropolitan areas, is proving to be a major challenge. According to Gordoan, Roberts and Struwig (2013), an attitudinal survey revealed that people in KwaZulu-Natal, compared to other provinces, were far less welcoming to non-nationals.

## Xenophobia in South Africa

As South Africa emerged from apartheid rule, a good number of social complexities have also emerged. Racial discrimination and racial language issues are still rearing their ugly head within

communities. Xenophobia is also another form of 'racism' that has found fertile ground to spread because of lack of trust on the local South Africans, fearing that other forms of oppression can gain ground (Pillay 2017). However, xenophobia is different from racism in that racism refers to racial superiority of one race over the other. Kaluba (2016) sees the two distinct phenomena as overlapping in multi-racial countries and still describes racism as being more behavioural, whereas xenophobia is attitudinal. Burlacu (2017:89) and Akinola (2017:9471) concur and state that in a much broader context xenophobia encompasses 'attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that rejects, excludes and vilify its targets based on the belief that they are perpetual outsiders' and cannot be trusted or assimilated into the their social system. Field (2017) and Adam and Moodly (2015:21), on the contrary, distinguish xenophobia from racism in that the latter use cultural incompatibilities and/or religion as the basis for exclusion. Grosfoguel, Oso and Chrisou (2013) mention that in other parts of the world, ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural markers construct both xenophobia and racism.

The word xenophobia is derived from two Greek words, *xeno* meaning stranger and *phobia* referring to fear (Akinola 2017: 9741; Masenya 2017). Generally, xenophobia means fear of strangers and of late, it has been extended to include hatred of refugees and migrant people and often associated with the violent acts of hostility (Field 2017). Saleh (2015:298) describes xenophobia as a deep-rooted dislike of foreigners by the nationals of the recipient country. Xenophobia in South Africa is directly related to the apartheid system of governing which entrenched protection of white privilege against the majority of black people and also played a central role of influencing new behavioural patterns (Minga 2015).

Soyombo (2010) notes that it is not only new migrants or foreigners who may suffer xenophobia but it may also be experienced by groups of people or people who may not be strangers. In South Africa, xenophobia is being experienced by migrants, who have been here for long periods and who even know the local dialects because of their long-term interactions with local groups. Yet, in the eyes of the indigenous black people of South Africa, this group remains as foreigners. In this context, as noted by Soyombo (2010), the term 'strangers' is used with reference to people who may not be the original inhabitants of a particular locality. The distinction between the 'locals', on the one hand, and 'foreigners' on the other hand, is conceptualised as 'in-group' (locals) or 'out-group' (foreigners). This demarcates the usual sharp distinction between members and non-members of a given community (Pillay 2008). McDonald and Jacobs (2005) point to the view that xenophobia in South Africa is a distinctive and widespread phenomenon, which the media, in particular, have been accused of exacerbating.

A cautious assessment of the construction of xenophobia in South Africa shows that reducing it to discourses and practices of discrimination against foreign nationals is simplistic and inadequate (Landau 2011). There have been

South African nationals who have been victims of attacks solely because of their linguistic habitus or even physical appearance (Greenburg 2010; Hassim, Kupe & Worby 2008, Polzer 2010). Landau (2011) and Steinberg (2008) cite cases of attacks motivated by the ethnic appearance of Mozambicans. This was also the case with ethnic minority members of Pedi and Venda extraction, who were attacked as foreign nationals solely because of their physical appearance. South Africans, coming from different provinces and speaking minority languages, may easily find themselves identified and treated as migrants in the metropolitan areas (Landau 2009; Polzer 2010). Kaluba (2016) and Soyombo (2010) support Polzer (2010) and Landau (2009) in that xenophobia emanates from the thinking that the 'other' is foreign to or simply originates from outside the community.

Based on the statistic supplied by the United Nations Development Plan (UNDP 2013), South Africa receives the largest number of international migrants on the continent. The first xenophobic attacks occurred in 2008 and since then sporadic incidences of violence have continued to occur throughout the country.

Since the demise of apartheid, South Africa has been under the spotlight as it approaches the 24th anniversary of its racially inclusive democracy (Pugh 2014). The presence of xenophobia and violence is increasingly becoming problematic for the country's constitutional democracy. South Africa as an emerging economy is experiencing rapid growth and industrialisation. Khanna and Palepu (2010) coined the term 'emerging market' in 1981 at the International Finance Corporation (IFC), when the group was promoting the first mutual fund investments in developing countries, referring to the rapidly growing Latin America and Asian economies.

The World Bank (2010) maintains that since then many emerging economies, including South Africa, have achieved relatively fast economic growth through market-oriented economic reforms and opening up their policies. In these economies, there is a high potential for growth, which sometimes poses political and social risks. This growth and development stimulated economic opportunities that attract foreign nationals to South Africa. Moyo (2015) points out that the emerging economies of Asia, Africa and Latin America have the aptitude to generate and nurture economic growth rate as high as 5.4% in 2018, hence expanding the global economy by 3.1% in the year.

Xenophobia in South Africa is mainly attributed to economic factors where foreigners are said to come in and take up all the limited unskilled work opportunities. According to the The Global Competitive Report (2017), South Africa has a challenge of unskilled labour force who are now competing for such opportunities with the migrants. The migrants grab the scarce opportunities because they are viewed as enterprising, can settle for less pay and cannot be members of any union; hence, employers can easily exploit them. South Africans are still at war with the remnants of apartheid, which include white

supremacy, and discrimination that is still representing the economic deprivation and discrimination on the jobs. The large influx of black foreigners becomes the target for their aggression because 24 years into democracy their expectations and high hopes are still not met (Tella & Ogunnubi 2014). Black foreigners are blamed for all the misfortunes that include unemployment, crime and the spread of diseases. Field (2017) observed that violent xenophobic attacks occur in the communities where the host citizens are deprived economically. South Africa has had a structural problem of unemployment in general for some time now, yet economic exploitation of unregistered migrant workers has deprived the locals of those work opportunities. Masenya (2017) alludes to the fact that xenophobia in South Africa stems from the local people alleging that foreign nationals took over their employment, markets and social opportunities.

South African xenophobia has a unique characteristic of being 'black on black' and does not affect those immigrants who take up white-collar jobs and stay in affluent suburbs. Those immigrants who choose to stay in the informal settlements, inner city areas and low-cost housing are mostly affected. The locals who were promised houses in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) did not benefit and they see foreigners occupying such houses, this own its own further promotes the concept of 'black on black'. To a greater extent, this unfair treatment is orchestrated by corruption of those who take away from the poor and the powerless for self-enrichment. Field (2017) discusses economic inequality and deprivation as the main causes of xenophobia in the low-income areas of South Africa. The locals feel that the migrants are progressing at their expense (Gelb 2008). Other factors like high crime rate in those areas create a conducive environment for xenophobia to exist. Foreigners are often blamed for violent crime especially murder, robbery and drug trafficking (Dodson 2010; Misago et al. 2008). Gordon (2015:8) points out how immigrant communities are portrayed as serious threats to locals and are viewed as 'aliens who seek to grab power and land'.

Pillay (2017) says cultural and religious intolerances are fast becoming contributory factors to xenophobia and racism in South Africa. Burlacu (2017) concurs and states that collective xenophobia is fostered by both construction and maintenance of cultural boundaries. As indigenes compete with immigrants for jobs that are lowly paid it fuels anger and hatred, which gives rise to xenophobic attacks (Crush 2008). Gorden et al. (2013) postulate that immigrant entrepreneurs were scapegoated because they are seen as a threat to the material livelihood of local communities especially in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN).

## The dynamics of xenophobia in South Africa

Harris (2002) describes three aspects of xenophobia, which are scapegoating, isolation and bio-cultural issues.

The scapegoat hypothesis emerged from sociological theory, and as a result, it locates xenophobia within the context of

South Africa's transition from an authoritarian to a democratic state. Botha (2012) maintains that the heightened expectations of many South Africans are reduced poverty, equal distribution of wealth and resources, so that when these expectations are not realised, people are disillusioned and frustrated. Thus, hostility to foreigners is explained in relation to limited resources. Tella and Ogunnubi (2014) maintain that the economic and political instability are ideal circumstances for xenophobia to prosper and for people to create a 'frustration scapegoat' to blame for their on-going deprivation and poverty. The people of South Africa are conceptualising xenophobia in terms of their frustration and relative deprivation.

The theory of scapegoating according to Tella and Ogunnubi (2014) posts that the vulnerable target groups are blamed by the more powerful groups for all societal ills, which they may not be responsible for. Black South Africans blame black immigrants for their misfortunes and economic hardships, which include unemployment, limited infrastructure and the spread of diseases. According to Tella and Ogunnubi (2014), scapegoating is a shift of aggression to another target when the original target becomes inaccessible or difficult.

Isolation situates 'foreigners' at the heart of hostility (Duncan 2012; Harris 2004). Under the apartheid regime, South Africa's borders were isolated from the rest of the continent as well as from the world, particularly because the apartheid regime had a narrow view that other countries threatened its racist policies and its imposition of a political monopoly on South African society (Duncan 2012). Botha (2012) points out that foreigners represented the unknown to South Africans during the isolation period. According to the isolation theory, as noted by Morris (1998), South Africans found difference in national identity to be threatening and dangerous. Xenophobia is a result of South Africa's isolation from the international community, and in particular the rest of Africa during the apartheid era (Duncan 2012; Harris 2002).

The bio-cultural theory maintains that xenophobia functions around cultural differences, as well as physical and biological characteristics such as skin colour, clothing style and the inability to speak an indigenous language. These are all markers that promote xenophobia between local nationals and foreigners. Morris (1998) gives an example of Nigerians and Congolese being easily identifiable from other foreigners because of their physical being and their accent. Nigerians are also singled out in the press for being involved in the sale of counterfeit goods, whilst Mozambicans are said to bring exotic herbs that local healers do not know (Hickel 2014). Other nationalities that have distinguishable physical and facial features are the Somalis, Ethiopians, Pakistanis and people from Bangladesh.

South Africa is also considered a very violent society; The Global Competitive Index (GCI) report (2017) indicates that personal security and violent crime are amongst the most problematic factors for doing business in South Africa. It can be argued that the battle against apartheid taught many

South Africans to overcome obstacles through violent means and because of economic frustrations, the locals still revert to that option to be heard. Xenophobic attacks dislocated foreign nationals economically as their businesses were looted and vandalised. McConnell (2009) puts the damage to foreign nationals owned business in 2008 at R1.5 billion. These acts resulted in political instability as municipalities and government were blamed for not doing enough to stop the violence (Bekker 2010; Fabricius 2017; Tshishonga 2015).

### The dimensions of xenophobia in South Africa

There are various dimensions of xenophobia depending on the context and location. Field (2017:3) puts forward four dimensions, which are not mutually exclusive. The first dimension is personal xenophobia where individuals fear or resent foreigners. This is related to stereotyping of foreigners as socially undesirable people (Field 2017). Crush (2008) established that this dimension of xenophobia is very prevalent in South Africa and is practised by many locals across all racial and social groups.

The second dimension of communal xenophobia occurs when communities identify themselves as being different from foreigners (Field 2017:3), hence they exclude them socially and culturally. This often manifests as mob violence and black South Africans express this dimension in many circumstances. The third dimension is the institutional xenophobia, which, according to Field (2017), is where government institutions like the police and home affairs have been accused of hostile attitudes towards black foreigners. Structural xenophobia could be practised worldwide when nations protect their citizens by choosing which immigrant can enter the respective countries (Field 2017).

### Leadership response to xenophobia in South Africa

An influx of xenophobic attacks in 2017 raised the concern of the world. Gareth Newham, Head of the Crime and Justice programme at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) as cited in Fabricius (2017), supports suggestions that political leaders played a role of legitimising the attacks when they openly blamed foreign nationals for crimes, such as prostitution, human trafficking and drug-dealing. Fabricius (2017) also refers to Ritchard Ots, Head of the South African office of the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), who urges government to do more to address 'scapegoatism'.

According to Gordon (2015), xenophobia occurs more prominently during the periods when the collective well-being of the locals seems fragile. Unemployment in South Africa was pegged at 26.6% in the second quarter of 2018 (Statistics SA 2018). The expanded definition of unemployment including the number of people who have stopped looking for work rose to 36.7% in the first quarter of 2018 and the number of unemployed people rose to 5.89 million (Statistics SA 2018). The crime rate, the Automated Teller Machines (ATM) bombing and the cash heist attacks are on the rise. Serious economic and social problems

confront the country and the blame is placed on foreigners. Competition for the few employment opportunities is high and often foreigners get them because they are willing to take up low wages and are prepared to work under poorer conditions (Landau 2010). At the height of the xenophobic attacks in 2008, a number of community leaders publicly lashed out at foreigners for their alleged role in fuelling unemployment and crime (Gordon 2015:8).

Maseny (2017) states how the South African leadership reduces xenophobia to criminality, hence their stance of blaming the few unruly members of society whilst the root causes of xenophobia remain unchallenged.

Minga (2015) apportions the blame to the involvement of a few xenophobic politicians and some police officials who are calling for ethnic purity. Gordon (2015) views that whenever the nationalistic self-images run into crisis because of lack of effective leadership, it creates a collective identity problem that forces people to turn to xenophobia. Landau (2010) and Ekambaram (2018) agree that politicians and government agents' reaction and comments seem to fuel xenophobic attacks. These reactions include King Goodwill Zwelithini's infamous statement of 2015 that was found to be anti-foreigners. The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) (2011) criticised the government of South Africa as showing very little or no response to efforts to combat xenophobia in the country. Gordon (2014) states that there was serious denialism of xenophobia by most officials during the deliberations. Academic studies by Hayem (2013), Landau (2010), Neocosmos (2010) and Desai (2008) indicate South African government denialism on xenophobia. Gordon (2014) quoting Dodson (2010:7) points at the former president Thabo Mbeki's reaction in 2008 as the most eloquent expression of denialism.

Former president Mbeki seemed to struggle with the reality of xenophobia in the country. In the July 2008 address, the former president was quoted saying:

I heard it said insistently that my people have turned or become xenophobic...I wonder what the accusers knew about my people which I do not know. (Dodson 2010:7)

In 2013 during a debate in the National Assembly, former president Zuma was also quoted expressing some denialism of the occurrence of xenophobia in the country:

I think at times there is a bit of exaggeration where people say xenophobia is a big problem in South Africa. I think that is a bit of an exaggeration, although I am not saying it is not there.... (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2013)

The reaction of police to xenophobia was by targeting all unregistered immigrants and that influenced the public to view the immigrant communities as a threat to the locals. Mayor Herman Mashaba of Johannesburg was widely criticised for his statement about the undocumented foreigners who occupy hijacked buildings in the inner city. Ekambaram (2018) also notes that the then minister in the presidency, Jeff Radebe, said that foreigners own the largest



number of spaza shops in the townships compared to locals. Ekambaram (2018) argued that instead of focussing on the number of spaza shops in foreign hands, more effort should be directed at empowering the local people and building sustainable township economies.

A National Social Cohesion Summit held in 2012 paved a way forward on how the social cohesion can be improved in the country. Professor Landau of the University of Witwatersrand observed that the anti-foreigner sentiments were evident in the summit discussions. The passivity of authorities in combating xenophobia extends to government failure to punish the perpetrators of anti-foreigner violence (Gordon 2014:500).

Hayem (2013:90) notes that all those arrested for the 2008 violence were released at the request of the political and community leadership.

At the height of the attacks in 2015, former president Zuma deployed the Ministers of Police, State Security and Home Affairs to KZN to work closely with the KZN Provincial Government in an effort to try and quell the situation and bring it to normal. The president also mandated the Security Cluster to work intensively on the issue and the Departments of Small Business Development and Trade and Industry were also involved. The ministers' mandate from the president was to work fast by engaging communities, organisations, representatives of foreign nationals and stakeholders to attend to concerns raised on both sides.

The objective of government was to avoid a recurrence of these incidents in future by ensuring a peaceful co-existence between locals and non-nationals (Government Communication Information Systems 2015).

Hope was not all lost as government issued a stern warning to South Africa, condemning the 2015 attacks in its strongest terms, and worked together with stakeholders in an effort to develop and implement a comprehensive response in addressing the attacks against non-nationals. In this incident, the leadership helped the people to understand the challenge and usually the leaders' response determines the speed of change and awareness.

Complex issues like xenophobia are confronting South Africa's soft power. Soft power is a form of power that utilises strategies like diplomacy, culture and history (Tella & Ogunnubi 2014:157). Nye (2004) originally states that soft power is the ability to influence people to rally behind shared values, culture and a sense of justness towards achievement of a common purpose. South Africa's soft power is its 'political values which include the liberal democracy, human rights culture and its progressive Constitution' (Tella & Ogunnubi 2014:157). However, there are practical limitations associated with soft power. Pietersen (2015:274) posts that soft power has direct effects on specific goals and eventually impacts on general goals. According to Pietersen (2015), soft power resources are difficult to control and are solely dependent on the willingness of the interpreters and receivers.

South African government response to xenophobia shaped the public opinion on the phenomenon. The major causal factors for xenophobia in the South African context include the strong assertion of national identity and economic inequality (Field 2017). Hence, the foreign population especially those from the rest of the African continent face different responses and hostilities from the local South Africans and the government officials. Although South Africa received a large influx of international immigrants, which include the Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Chinese immigrants, the most undesirable are the black Africans (Gordon 2014:495). The Nigerians and Somalis are disliked most, as they are labelled drug dealers and drug mules (Tella & Ogunnubi 2014). Tella and Ogunnubi (2014:154) shared the testimony of a British scholar who observed that the treatment at Home Affairs was different for foreign black and white people.

## Social complexity

Xenophobia is an embarrassment to South Africa as one of the continental giants both economically and politically. South Africa is the only African member in the G20 and has a seat in the United Nations Security Council. South Africa has a good Constitution that guarantees rights of both citizens and non-citizens. Hence, issues like xenophobia tarnish the good image of the Rainbow Nation. Overly, the government condemns violence and acts of xenophobia. However, the colonial racism continues to produce zones of being and non-being (Grosfoguel et al. 2013:7). As noted by Grosfoguel et al. (2013:11), the immigrants are arriving into a space where power relations still bear the apartheid demarcations and the zones of being and non-being were never completely erased, hence there is no neutral space for immigrants.

Schwella et al. (2015) alluding to the complexity dimension in public leadership and singled out that issues have become so intertwined so much that policies are becoming difficult to explain to the public. Usually, the visible is not necessarily the problem, but symptoms and signs of discontentation. In order for leadership to make sense of social complexity, a considerable shift in the ontological and cognitive mind-sets is required (Toendepi 2017; Davis 2015). Moreover, a complex system self-organises in response to feedback from a wider environment within which it exists (Walton 2016). Social complexity requires an appreciation and understanding of all the components of the system (Sanial 2014:3). The usefulness of complexity theory in public policy is its universality and shared emergent patterns that will provide insights into the future potential interactions (Sloan 2011). However ontological shifts are not easy; they require collective understanding of the problem at hand and consensus on a way forward (Toendepi 2017).

## Migration

Martin and Wildren (2002) view cross-border mobility of people as an international challenge for the 21st century. Migration is therefore an unavoidable yet important aspect of economic and social life in the 21st century (Kalitanyi & Visser 2010).

Stephen (2007) notes that the borders crossed by people are economic, social, physical, political and cultural. Maharaj (2009) notes that issues of religious or ethnic discrimination and race mean that citizenship into receiving countries is not always automatic. Palmay (1998) refers to a memorandum of understanding signed between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the South African government, allowing refugees to enter South Africa.

Thet (2012), however, maintains that most studies show migration to be influenced primarily by economic factors. Thus, the basic economic factors that motivate migration are classified either as 'push' or as 'pull' factors. According to Kianth (2009), the factors that force a person to leave his or her homeland and go to another place are the push factors. The common push factors are poor economic conditions, unemployment, lack of opportunities and underdevelopment. The common pull factors are better living conditions, opportunities for better employment, better working conditions, higher wages and adequate infrastructure (Thet 2012; Kianth 2009).

Wets (2007) maintains that in the process of migration, both the countries of destination and origin benefit.

The country of origin benefits through remittances. Katseli, Lucas and Xenogiani (2006:48) concur and state that remittances are the key mechanisms through which the net gains of migrants are transferred to those remaining at home. This represents the dominant route through which non-migrants benefit from the migration process. Gigaba (2016) says that migrants from Africa sent back home approximately \$35 billion in 2015, an amount nearly equalling the total amount of development aid granted to sub-Saharan Africa every year by the OECD. The actual number may be even higher if unrecorded and informal remittances are considered. South Africa is undoubtedly one of the most progressive economies on the continent. Yet, the impact of the socio-economic factors on local people pushes them to xenophobic tendencies. It is the responsibility of leadership to stimulate consciousness on all critical issues that challenges economic growth and prosperity of the country.

## Methods

A qualitative exploratory study was conducted concentrating in South Africa's KZN region to understand the participants' social world (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The seven participants were purposefully sampled from the academia, government, policy analysts and non-profit organisations. The sample had three white males, two black males, one coloured female and one black female. The participants' selection was based on their involvement with the xenophobic affairs and the related social disturbances in their line of work for a period of 8 years and more. They all are university graduates and all aged below 60 except for one white male who was above 60 at the time the data were

collected in 2016. The research process was interactive and allowed interactions with the participants. Each interview data was analysed and interpreted simultaneously to build a cumulative narrative. Braun and Braun (2013) state that six stages of coding were followed in coding the data.

The semi-structured interview transcriptions provided rich and diverse data. The primary data were augmented by content analysis on the reports that were selected based on their significance and richness on xenophobia in South Africa. These were the South African Human Right Commission (SAHRC) Report on 2008, Violence against Non-Nationals, Special Reference Group (SRG), Report on Migration and Community Integration in KZN and Report on Migrating for Work Research Consortium (MiWORC). The two themes of stereotyping and xenophobia as a social issue that emerged from content analysis did not feature in the interviews, hence they illuminated the findings.

## Findings

Six themes emerged; four of the themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews and these were the following:

- unintended policy consequence
- inequality as an economic consequence
- the violent nature of South African society
- denial of xenophobia.

Secondary data generated two main themes:

- stereotyping
- xenophobia as a social issue.

### Unintended policy consequence

Unintended policy consequences emerged from discussions around South African foreign and immigration policies. Participants viewed xenophobia as an unintended consequence from policy as stated by some of the participants (P).

'If you look at immigration in terms of the immigration policy, xenophobia is one of the unintended consequences of many things, not just our immigration policy, but of a huge level of underdevelopment ... xenophobia remains an unintended consequence which is not a structure that is structured because of immigration policy, its more because of economic inequality in the world, not in SA, and so SA is no different ...' (P7)

'Sometimes there can be unintended consequences in some of these policies which may be well intentioned but because of administration and there are challenges, and that negates the whole objective of the policy.' (P4)

'I don't think so, I think they are regional issues you know, the region seems not to be in a clear position, that being immigration across these countries and other countries across the region are not clearly pulling their weight when it comes to dealing with this question, it would quite be unreasonable to expect SA's foreign policy to specifically address that question, it is a regional issue not necessarily a country issue, so I wouldn't place the blame squarely on South Africa's foreign and immigration policy, I'm not saying that SA's foreign policy or immigration

policy is suppressed, but it would depend on other countries within the region.' (P5)

Fabricius (2017) says government's denial in accepting xenophobia for what it is, is a contributory factor to lack of effective initiatives that can deal effectively with the fundamental causes. Government uses the pretext that South Africa is no different from the rest of the world in how to handle xenophobia. However, most participants were satisfied that South Africa's immigration policy was not designed to handle xenophobia, but was designed to ensure that South Africa exists in the community of nations at the dawn of democratic rule in 1994. The participants support the notion that xenophobia is more of a regional issue than for South Africa alone. The importance of the immigration policies and regional agreements in addressing migration and xenophobia was underscored.

### Inequality as an economic consequence

The majority of the participants pointed to the growing inequality levels in the country as a major reason for economic consequences that ignite xenophobia:

'Regardless of the legal standing of the person in SA, this brought them into sharp tension with the locals who feel excluded, marginalized economically, opportunity wise, education wise, even social service wise, so in any environment, in any living species, when you have someone who feels threatened, the natural response is to fight, and hence in my view xenophobia is not as a consequence of foreign relation or as a consequence of our immigration policy, it is purely a question of inequality.' (P7)

'I think I would be xenophobic, if I saw people coming in, I would say God we can't survive and more of these people are coming in and taking our jobs, I would probably view my world like that .... People are very conscious of how some people are filthy rich and how some people struggle to put food on the table. Everybody watches television programs like Top Billing where week by week they see palace mansions that are being put up and most of the population live in very compressed dwellings if not in shacks or on the streets so what we see what we see in television is a provocation of people to revolt, what else can they ...' (P3)

The gap between rich and poor is problematic in South Africa, the Gini-coefficient ranges from 0.660% to 0.696% depending on the variables used. The Gini-coefficient measures the levels of income inequality and it ranges from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality) (OECD 2011).

'People are struggling with the issues of unemployment, poverty, access to basic services and we not quite there, we have our constitution so when you have this sought of perceived competition for the already perceived scarce resources.' (P4)

'I do believe that the growing gap and the growing awareness of that gap has led to widespread social dissatisfaction and anger, and it manifests itself in many ways, the burning of schools, the burning of universities, the rise of opposition parties in some places and the rise of xenophobic violence, people are increasingly looking for fixes to their social problems.' (P1)

Currently, not only foreign nationals are at the receiving end, but nationals are turning onto each other and the race card

raised when suited. With the terms like 'state capture', 'corruption' and 'white monopoly capital', the poor and the rising middle-class feel once more manipulated to the will of political leaders. Statements on how to address this gap shared by the participants dwell on how the government must intensify its investments in local entrepreneurs, as an alternative to combat xenophobia.

'A huge investment in entrepreneurial activities for local communities is required.' (P3)

Most migrants are engaged in entrepreneurial activities within the township. However, entrepreneurial upskilling alone might not yield the intended results. The participants shared that if economic participation is improved and available resources shared equitably, the tension between locals and non-nationals that result in xenophobia may ease out:

'I think we just have to make sure that there is sufficient economic participation among locals in SA ... . You really need people intervention that will ensure equitable distribution of opportunities across including SA ... . Its where people are the most vulnerable, when people are economically vulnerable they are easily enticed to quick solution such as attacking foreigners to solve a problem, the simple part of it, that's way they do, I really don't think it's a good solution, it's a simplified idea of life and economic life, inequality is made much sharper.' (P5)

### The violent nature of South African society

Most of the participants seemed to be aware of the hostility towards foreigners and pointed out that South Africans become very violent especially when their economic needs are threatened. This gives them a flash back into the apartheid era where they had to use all violent means to gain freedom. Participants held the notion that South Africans' violence signifies people who are looking for quick solutions to their social problems. Overcrowded informal settlements marked with high levels of poverty create fertile ground for xenophobic activities.

We need to understand xenophobia is a symptom of a much deeper problem in community displacement amongst SA, so xenophobia is when people begin to attribute those within society to the presence of a foreigner that is a symptom, I don't think we can deal with xenophobia without the underlying issues about integration of SAs into the economy ...' (P5)

The legacy of apartheid contributes to xenophobic violence, and participants hold the view that this legacy taught many South Africans to achieve their desire through violent means. The inadequate infrastructure provision, where a large number of people have to compete for the scarce infrastructure, ignites a lot of anger.

The participants blamed local government's weaknesses in micro-township politics as fuelling xenophobia.

When a large number of people are staying in the informal settlements where poverty levels are high, it creates good ground for violent attacks and all other social ills. Participant 7 elaborated on this issue as it happens in South Africa:



'... and this is my own interpretation there's no science that says this but I guess because of the proximity of people who live in poverty or who are not well-off, it's easier to mobilize against one another, it just happened that they are mobilizing against foreign nationals but if you had to look at this thing differently, if you had to go to a place and they say that Gogo is a witch, before you know it that Gogo is dead and she's not a foreigner but we still kill her, that man raped a child, we don't care whether the man did or did not rape a child that man is killed.' (P7)

There is a governance crisis within the townships, which gives rise to xenophobic attacks. The participants are aware of the rapid urban growth in South Africa and notes that there is no proper planning to match the urban sprawl:

'If I were a person living in shack, unemployed and my children couldn't go to school, my children would be hungry because there wouldn't be food, I will always be trying to save to survive, I think I would be xenophobic, if I saw people coming in, I would say God we can't survive and more of these people are coming in and taking our jobs, I would probably view my world like that.' (P3).

### Denial of xenophobia

The participants raised a number of issues regarding government and leadership's responses to xenophobia and the related violence. This theme includes leadership's denial and criminalisation of xenophobia. Participants see the denial by the leadership as a way of condoning xenophobia, hence the general populace assumed it was okay to vandalise foreigners' property and to isolate them. That leadership denial got into the way of collective understanding of the causes of the phenomenon and a way forward:

'I think politicians idealised a whole lot of things, so there was a lot of ideology and blame game, so by the time we woke up there were too many body bags, so I think we probably should never have dealt with it in the manner we did. We spent a lot of time discussing whether it is xenophobia or not and yet people were dying.' (P7)

'Some people deny the existence of xenophobia, saying xenophobia is just a crime.' (P2)

The leadership, in its bid to protect the image of the country, tried to criminalise xenophobia and unfortunately that response influenced more attacks:

'These things have been recurring over a long time. What government has been doing is to protect the image of South Africa that we are not xenophobic, that's it's a criminal element, and so it is difficult to address the problem, government should put action to xenophobia.' (P5)

### Stereotyping

This theme emerged from the secondary data and was a combination of issues that blamed the African immigrants for all societal ills within the country. The immigrants are often blamed for taking up all the unskilled job opportunities, violent crime, spread of diseases, drug trafficking and wife snatching. Because of the growing sense of entitlement from locals, they stereotype immigrants as a way of diverting their

anger from government failure to address the structural problems they face.

### Xenophobia as a social issue

Xenophobia is a symptom of underlying socio-economic challenges the majority of the low-income people are facing. It does not exist in isolation; it needs the general population and its leadership's acknowledgement. The theme shows that there is a need for dialogue, education and awareness campaigns around xenophobia.

### Discussion

The findings of this research showed that South Africa's migration profile has changed drastically since the dawn of democracy. South Africa accommodates international immigrants, mostly from all over the continent as well as a significant number from the South Asian countries of Pakistan and India. Most of the immigrants come to South Africa as international students, skilled professionals, economic refugees and refugees escaping conflicted areas (Oluwaseun & Olusola 2014). The economic opportunities, especially in the informal sector, are a major attraction (Chimnga & Meier 2014). However, the increased movement of people across national boundaries is a phenomenon of the 21st century that is accelerated by globalisation.

The migration patterns have created unforeseen socio-economic and socio-political challenges for South Africa. Xenophobia in South Africa became visible in 2008 when the international community witnessed acts of violence directed at non-nationals by indigenous South Africans, contrary to the founding principles of country's human rights values. The translation of the word xenophobia is fear of strangers or deep-rooted dislike of foreigners (Pillay 2017; Saleh 2015). The unique characteristics of xenophobia in South Africa are that it is predominantly 'black on black', and it borrows the protectionist tendencies from the apartheid system of governing which entrenched protection of the white privilege (Pillay 2017). The participants agreed that most South Africans learnt to be violent during the struggle against apartheid and unfortunately, whenever their status seems threatened they revert to violence.

There are various dimensions of xenophobia shaped by the context and location (Field 2017). Most of the participants were well versed with the dimensions of xenophobia that include personal xenophobia. Crush (2008) established that this dimension is very prevalent in South Africa across all racial and social groups.

However, communal xenophobia (Field 2017) which manifest as mob violence is widely expressed in South Africa too. The participants agreed that xenophobia is a consequence of the socio-economic environment in the country.

The triple challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment are crippling the country. The unemployment



rate is 26.6% in the second quarter of 2018 and the Gini-coefficient that measures income inequality is 0.696% (Statistics SA 2018). The immigrants are blamed for snatching the few job opportunities available because they accept low pay and can work under unfavourable conditions (Landau 2010). Hence, the competition for scarce resources creates an ideal situation for xenophobia to flourish. The locals also find an opportunity to blame foreigners for all social ills, like violent crime, spread of diseases and snatching of wives and drug trafficking in justifying the violent attacks.

According to Gordon (2015), xenophobia gains ground when the collective well-being of the locals seems fragile. The participants discussed the appalling living conditions of the majority of the low-income indigenous people, joblessness and lack of adequate infrastructure as contributory factors to the occurrence of xenophobia. These factors coupled with governance crisis within the townships create fertile ground for xenophobia. The participants mentioned micro-politics at township level as a factor that encouraged xenophobic violence. Misago (2011) argues that local political players organised and led the violence, as an attempt to claim and consolidate the authority and power needed to further their economic and political interests.

## Leadership response

The leadership response shaped the public opinion on xenophobia. All the participants saw the denial by leadership as a way of condoning xenophobia. Both former presidents Mbeki and Zuma were quoted denying that xenophobia was prevalent in the country (Dodson 2010; Gordon 2014; Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2013). The APRM (2011) criticised the South African government for showing little or no response to the efforts to combat xenophobia.

Fabricius (2017) said the political leadership played a role in legitimising xenophobic attacks when they openly blamed foreign nationals for societal ills. Gordon (2015) points out how effective leadership was required to assist the local communities understand the phenomenon and establish a collective understanding.

The participants also agreed that the political leadership did not handle the matter effectively, instead a lot of time was spent denying the occurrence of such violence and in the minds of the communities it became justified to burn and loot property belonging to foreign nationals. The police and the Department of Home Affairs exacerbated the urge for xenophobia by targeting the immigrant communities as the problem creators.

Studies by Heymen (2013), Landau (2010), Neocosmos (2010) and Desai (2008) indicated that South African government denialism on xenophobia influenced the mob to continue with the violent attacks on the immigrant communities. There still exists a lack of political will from the leadership to assist the communities to understand and stop xenophobia. Some of the participants agreed that

xenophobia is a symptom of the underlying socio-economic challenges that the majority of the low income South Africans face. Poor housing, joblessness, crime, income inequality, poverty and inadequate service delivery are some of the challenges.

The communities divert their anger from government failures to address the structural issues to attacking the immigrant communities.

## Limitations of the study

All the participants in this study were South Africans living and working in KZN who had never experienced xenophobia or any violence. A balanced view of what happened and why could have been achieved by including the perpetrators and the lived experiences of some immigrants who had suffered the xenophobic attacks.

## Future research

Future research to expand this topic should be done on South African immigration and related policies to assess how immigrants enter the country, are legalised and eventually are integrated into the local society. There seems to be a disconnection in the process.

## Recommendations

There are systemic lessons for South African leadership to learn from the xenophobic attacks that may assist them in dealing with other complex challenges. The following are the suggested measures that can assist the South African leadership in handling xenophobia and other complex adaptive challenges:

- Structural challenges like unemployment, inequality and poverty need an urgent holistic attention.
- There is need for awareness programmes, investment into community dialogues, widespread education campaigns on the phenomenon of xenophobia, social cohesion and other social problems.
- Responses to xenophobia must be rooted in an adequate analysis of the causal factors and fostering of a collective understanding and a way forward.
- There is need for investment into the entrepreneurial activities for the local communities so that they too actively participate and contribute economically.
- South African leadership requires training in tackling complex issues head-on and in finding everlasting solutions.

## Conclusion

The rapid escalation of complexity is widely acknowledged as one of the biggest challenges confronting leadership. However, if the leadership does not assist communities to understand the complexities around them, it results in unintended consequences. Leadership needs to accept the reality of xenophobia instead of denying it. Xenophobia in South Africa is a result of stereotyping and scapegoating

where there is a shift of aggression from the government's failures to deliver what they promised to the people, like the equitable distribution of wealth and reduced poverty.

The findings show that xenophobia is South Africa has nothing to do with the immigration procedures although these require a further scrutiny to make them more robust. The participants said migration is a regional issue and South Africa alone cannot address it effectively. The lack of political will to curb xenophobia exacerbates the problem when leadership keeps denying its occurrence in a bid to protect national image. In an effort to curb xenophobia and the related violence, the National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (NAP) and the Department of Justice Bill (2016) were passed, making hate and discrimination a criminal offence. However, the socio-economic and socio-political issues remain the underlying causes of xenophobia.

## Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Authors' contributions

C.M.M. was the principal researcher. L.M.M.H. was the supervisor and was responsible for the conceptualisation of the research and for adjusting the article. J.T. reviewed the literature, re-analysed the data and contributed to expert advice.

## Ethical considerations

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## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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