



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA



**Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation – Consortium for Refugees
and Migrants in South Africa – Heinrich Böll Stiftung**

**Proceedings of the Seminar : Why do we fear and hate the ‘other’? Understanding
xenophobia in the South African context**

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BACKGROUND

The recent brutal attacks against foreign nationals and the subsequent displacement of thousands of others have questioned the extent to which human rights are truly understood and protected in South Africa. These attacks have been labelled “xenophobic” in the media as well as in various circles of discussions around the country. Xenophobia is not a new phenomenon in South Africa and attacks against foreigners have been well documented over the years. However, the intense and brutal nature of the attacks as well as the propensity for the violence to spread to other communities renders the situation critical and bordering on a humanitarian crisis.

Xenophobia has been described as an intense dislike, hatred or fear of others perceived to be strangers. **Xenophobia describes attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity.**

The recent attacks have highlighted the lack of understanding of what xenophobia means in the South African context, its root causes and manifestations.

Against this background, the CSVV hosted a seminar to discuss theoretical understandings of xenophobia and their implications for policy making and implementation, research and advocacy, as well as interventions in the current context.

WELCOME

The seminar was opened and chaired by Nomfundo Mogapi, Trauma and Transition Programme Manager at the CSVV. Ms Mogapi welcomed the speakers and attendees, expressing gratitude for their attendance despite the seminar’s relatively short notice. She echoed the sentiments of many at the gathering by expressing shock and dismay at the recent attacks but also reminded participants of the importance of moving beyond the statistics presented in the media (such as 42 people dead and 30,000 displaced) and putting a human face to the tragedy.

Ms Mogapi explained the seminar did not intend to unpack and understand all the underlying factors, in particular socio-economic factors, which have been argued to have fuelled the attacks. However, with many of the attacks being described in the public domain as “xenophobic”, it was important to interrogate the meaning and understanding of xenophobia. The panel of experts invited to speak are all familiar with the notion of xenophobia from different perspectives.

PRESENTATIONS

Speaker 1: Professor Michael Neocosmos, Department of Sociology, the University of Pretoria - “Xenophobia: The politics of fear and the fear of politics”

Many attempts to understand xenophobia lie within analyses of capitalism and economic deprivation experienced by certain communities. Yet, it is important to note that the victims of the recent attacks were neither rich nor white, the group normally assumed to occupy a privileged economic position in South Africa. Rather, the victims have been foreign nationals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore it is possible that the victims were scapegoats and used to justify a deeper, more complex resentment against foreigners in South Africa.

The role of power and ideology

It is imperative to look at structural relations between people in society. Relations between poor communities function within parameters that have already been set by powerful institutions, such as the state. This relationship between “South African-ness” and “other-ness” are already carved out by structures of power unless it is deliberately challenged by certain ideologies and organisations. The parameters that have been set by political thinking in South Africa centre around the politics of fear, and fear of the unknown. There have been few, sustained attempts to contradict these parameters.

In the past, several well-known thinkers have articulated sentiments pertaining to marginalised groups in particular societies. These statements, although written several decades ago, are still very pertinent today and at this time, speak directly to the current climate in South Africa. At the time of the assassination of JFK Kennedy, black nationalist leader Malcolm X spoke of the “chickens coming home to roost”. This statement can be likened to the current situation in South Africa whereby parameters of fear and exclusion have been set and the country is unfortunately, reaping the consequences of the politics it has engaged in since democracy.

Similarly Franz Fanon, observing political struggles in Africa in the 1960s, noted that some African countries have moved from colonialism, to nationalism, to chauvinism and then finally to racism.

A key question then, is who, in fact, decides who belongs to a nation? In many cases belonging is secured through being indigenous to a country; it is believed and normally accepted that if one is indigenous, one is allowed to be part of a nation. This is certainly the case in South Africa and there is often a perilous oscillation between African unity and chauvinism.

The politics of Fear

In several recent discussions on the issue of xenophobia, there exists a feeling that poor communities have felt neglected and consequently attacked those they consider as foreigners. However, these feelings and actions did not occur in a political vacuum and can be argued to have been fuelled by the politics of fear. The politics of fear are rooted in colonialism and apartheid and more often than not is a fear of blackness, commonly termed “negro-phobia”. In the recent attacks, those who are being attacked are of darker skin.

Features of the Politics of Fear

There are 4 features of the politics of fear:

1. It hinges on a discourse created by those in power. In South Africa there has been a consistent development of a discourse of xenophobia which has emanated from government departments as well as certain pieces of legislation. Prominent politicians have, in the past, referred to foreigners as “aliens” and cautioned against the subsequent threat they place to the Reconstruction and Development Programme. Similarly, there exists for instance a stereotype of Nigerian immigrants being drug traffickers. In addition to this, police officers have been accused of assaults on migrants while tearing up their official documents. Extortion rackets are rife in Sunnyside Pretoria and the Lindela detention centre on the outskirts of Johannesburg is notorious for being an unsafe haven where money is extorted from residents who are assaulted and criminalised. These events reveal systematic and degrading treatment by the forces of law and order to a group of persons who are politically weaker. Thus, migration and the understanding of migration, have, in the public sphere, become associated with crime and violence.
2. South African exceptionalism – this relates to the notion that South Africa relates to and engages with the rest of Africa as though it is not part of the same continent. South Africa is often accused to seeing itself as a first world country with superior status. Due to South Africa’s political stability and high level of industrialization, it has been argued that it relates to the rest of Africa in a condescending and paternalistic manner, observing other African countries as the “real” Africa, which is primitive and rich with ethnic diversity.
3. The politics of being indigenous – this refers to the notion that to be indigenous is the only way to acquire resources. The concept of “nativism” or “nativeness” then gives one legitimacy over others who are not natives. However, in actuality the only true natives in South Africa are the San speaking communities, with all other groups having migrated from either within or outside of Africa. It is important to note that being a native is a political definition and in fact, has little or nothing to do with history. Often persons termed “native” or “indigenous” are awarded powerful positions in society on the assumption that being indigenous is the only way to understand South Africa. This has resulted in feelings of exclusion and “otherness”.
4. Passive citizenship – this relates to heavy reliance on the state to provide services. In many cases, citizens don’t want to be critical, and a culture of self-censorship and nationhood is celebrated.

Speaker 2: Professor Gillian Finchilescu, Chair of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand - “The psychology of xenophobia: the development of social and cultural identities”

Xenophobia is described as prejudice against people who belong to another national group. The definition of prejudice is:

“The holding of derogatory social attitudes or cognitive beliefs, the expression of negative feelings, or the display of hostile or discriminatory behaviour towards members of a group on account of their membership of that group”

Any social group can be a target of prejudice. Groups which are categorised according to race, ethnicity, religion, sex, social class, nationality, political beliefs, among others can be targets. It is important to note that these are not only social groups but *socially constructed* groups.

People can be born into social groups, choose them or be forced into them by virtue of appearance, affliction or achievement. There is an urge within many people to belong to social groups as they are believed to offer a form of protection, access to resources, a feeling of belonging and a kinship with others. Social groups can often give a recipe for living, present a normative, instructing and influencing us on behaviours and notions of right and wrong.

In many cases people in a social group are perceived to be more alike than they actually are and therefore, are in some sense, stereotyped. There is also a risk of seeing people in a social group as more different than people in another social group. In short, it is possible to fixate on certain characteristics.

Manifestations of prejudice

Prejudice can be manifested through “structural prejudice” where certain groups are excluded from the culture of a country; where groups from a particular background are discriminated against (in extreme cases, this results in genocide); and where discriminatory laws exist which enforce differences in access to resources and power.

Prejudice on an interpersonal level is manifested through one having negative beliefs or attitudes towards another group, attributing negatives associations and consequences toward another group, avoiding certain groups and exhibiting derogatory and discriminatory behaviour towards another group which may culminate in violence.

Reasons for prejudice

People are normally prejudiced against other social groups for a variety of reasons:

- Individual circumstances – frustration, relative deprivation, boredom
- Ego protection or jealousy – it is convenient and useful to have another group to blame for disappointments in one’s life
- Attitudes and behaviour learned from others (parents, peers, media)
- Way of enhancing own group and/or getting more resources for own group
- Perceptions of threat (real & symbolic) from the other group – the recent attacks have highlighted beliefs that foreigners are taking jobs, houses and women from South Africans
- It is tolerated or normative in society

Crowd behaviour

Not all crowds are bad or negative; some are well organised, other spontaneous; some are peaceful while others are not. Some characteristics of some crowds include:

- De-individuation – this occurs when people lose their individual personalities and sense of personal values
- Contagion – when one is aroused by the crowd and simply goes with the emotions of the crowd
- Anonymity
- Identification – this relates to the crowd taking on identity of a social group and subsequently persons identifying themselves with the crowd
- Behavioural direction - this relates to a person's behaviour being affected by the identity and norms of the crowd

Research Findings

Hwabibi Laher of the University of the Witwatersrand and UNISA Institute for Social and Health Sciences, under the guidance of Professor Gillian Finchilescu, conducted research on xenophobia titled “**Antagonism toward African immigrants in South Africa: An Integrated Threat Theory (ITT) approach**”.

The aim of the research was to test whether the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT) explains prejudice (dislike) toward African immigrants in Johannesburg. According to the ITT, factors that influence prejudice (dislike) are:

- intergroup anxiety – this is when certain groups prefer not to interact with out-group members and worry about reactions from others if they do. For example, some South Africans may feeling embarrass about talking to African immigrants and wonder what others from their own group would conclude about it
- negative stereotyping – this serves to furnish explanations for the behaviour of out-groups and also used to justify the superiority of the ingroup and enhance its self esteem
- realistic threats - threat to welfare of group; threat to economic power and physical well being of the group
- symbolic threats – in-groups value system, belief system or worldview

All the above factors are believed to cause prejudice or dislike for an out-group.

The sample comprised of 345 South African citizens, of all races, aged between the ages of 18 and 78 years.

The results of the survey are as follows:

- South Africans who feel anxious when interacting with African immigrants, have a greater level of intolerance toward African immigrants
- South Africans who negatively stereotype African immigrants show a greater level of intolerance toward African immigrants
- The greater the prejudice (dislike) toward African immigrants, the higher the levels of anxiety
- The greater the levels of prejudice (dislike), the greater the tendency to negatively stereotype
- Despite evidence that shows that Black South African men were the most hostile toward African immigrants, the current study did not show evidence of this
- The Integrated threat theory and its constituting factors (intergroup anxiety, realistic threats, symbolic threats and stereotypes) predicted prejudice toward African immigrants

Implications of findings and Recommendations

- Findings may be used by government, psychologists, social workers etc. in an attempt to decrease prejudice
- Particular threats could be addressed and used to foster positive inter-group contact
- Findings may be used to educate the South African public on the culture and lifestyle of immigrants

Speaker 3: Ingrid Palmary, Coordinator, Gender Violence and Displacement, Forced Migration Studies, University of the Witwatersrand - “A critical analysis of the current legislation and policies around migration in South Africa and its links to xenophobia”

Although South Africa does place emphasis on acquiring skilled labour and attracting foreign direct investment, there is very little to no protection of rights of the large numbers of low skilled migrants in the country. Some progress has been made in regards to bilateral agreements; however, most migrants are left in a policy vacuum where their migration is criminalised. Non nationals who are on temporary contracts often find it difficult to regularise their stay. As a result they are criminalised and subject to detention.

Both the Immigration Act and Refugees Act are challenging to implement with the latter making very little difference to the lives of the majority of migrants. The work permit procedure is highly complicated and many employers do not engage with the process. Rather, in many cases, it suits employers to employ foreign nationals who are more easily exploitable. The collective result of this is a suppression of wage labour in South Africa which has the potential to fuel hostility between South Africans and foreign nationals.

The implementation laws and policies of immigration fall within the mandate of national government. As a result provincial and local government are often unwilling to deal with the issue of migrants and have preferred to deny the existence of migrants, and have often been slow to speak on the attacks against migrants that have occurred in their constituencies.

The current South African immigration policy is influenced by the “control” ethos whereby persons are expected to show identity documents, are subject to detentions and asylum seekers must regularly report to refugee centres. These tactics against migrants are not dissimilar to tactics used during apartheid against blacks.

The South African policies are now aimed at controlling and limiting migration. However, challenges in managing migration are not unique to South Africa. While every country has the right to regulate migration, an inherent problem exists whereby migrants are criminalised.

As a result of the decline in rural farming as well as changes to family structure due to HIV, many South Africans frequently move to urban areas. Therefore rural/urban migration within South Africa is occurring at a much higher rate than cross border migration. There is a need for policy makers to admit that the urban population is, in fact, made up of mostly domestic migrants and address the challenges from this standpoint.

Speaker 4: Sichel'mphilo Shange-Buthane, Advocacy Officer Consortium for Refugee and Migrants in South Africa - "Practical interventions to uproot xenophobia: gains, gaps and challenges"

Gains and successes

Prior to the violence in recent week, the Consortium had been consistently intervening in communities to address issues such as violence faced by foreign nationals. One notable initiative was the Roll Back Xenophobia campaign launched in 1998. Although this campaign can claim significant achievements, it was criticised for being on a micro level. In addition to this campaign, the Consortium recently established a "tackling xenophobia" working group comprised of government departments, national and international NGOs and state institutions such as the South African Human Rights Commission. The working group is tasked with looking into incidences of violence, the gaps in interventions and strategies to address these gaps.

Opportunities for intervention

Despite the horrific nature of the violence, it has sensitised many stakeholders to the severity of the problem of xenophobia. The issue has received increased media coverage, continuously provides platforms for individuals to voice concerns and presents an opportunity for collective engagement between government, civil society and communities. It also calls on South Africa as a country to educate its population on the issue of migrants and migration.

Gaps and challenges

Generally speaking, communities and municipalities are not capacitated to deal with xenophobia. Community dynamics are usually managed by community leaders and/or ward councillors; however, if a foreign national is involved in a conflict, the situation appears more complicated and not easily resolved.

There is lack of coordination from government departments in addressing the challenges facing foreign nationals. In many cases government departments will refer foreign nationals to the Department of Home Affairs for assistance with service provisions. However, while the Department of Home Affairs is set up to assist with documentation, the relevant government departments at local level are mandated to assist with service provision. Too often the benefits some immigrants enjoy are received only through litigation.

At times media reporting could be problematic with terms such as "migrants", "refugees" and "immigrants" being used interchangeably. There needs to be increased sensitivity to the fact that there are different migrant communities in South Africa.

Strategies

- *Imbizos* (forums for enhancing dialogue and interaction between government and the people) works well for discussing issues that face most South African citizens. Convening an *imbizo* for immigrant communities should also be considered.

- Immigrant communities should be integrated into the community and form part of community structures such as the Community Policing Forum, the Community Development Forum, business forums etc., where foreign nationals and South Africans can exchange views and chart solutions in a collective manner.
- The quality of community responsiveness from SAPS needs to be increased. They have, in the past, been accused of failing to prevent violence when tipped off about an impending attack. When the SAPS is in need of reinforcements from the provincial government, the process is bureaucratic and reinforcements are often slow to materialise.
- There is a need to lobby for access to services for immigrant communities. Subtle xenophobia exists in places such as public hospitals which have been known to turn away foreign nationals because of their immigration status.

DISCUSSIONS

Condemnation versus empathy

It has been argued that discussions on the attacks should centre on lack of service delivery rather than xenophobia. This suggests that certain programmes need to be conceptualised and implemented. The panel admitted that there were no simple solutions to eradicating prejudices but advocated against putting foreigners into camps, suggesting that more contact with other groups increases the possibilities of breaking down of stereotypes. Some participants were also concerned that the immediate reactions to the perpetrators of the attacks were to condemn without creating a space to air grievances around socio-economic conditions. Participants suggested that the manner in which resources are tied to a “native” identity is translating down to the grassroots level and ultimately resulting in a sense of entitlement. Therefore there is a need to find a balance between articulating a zero tolerance to such violence and unearthing the underlying factors that are believed to have ignited the violence.

The socio-economic question

Some participants contended that the root of the problem may not always be socio-economic problems and to argue as such gives the attacks a semblance of decency and gives credence to a right-wing ideology. The type of violence perpetuated against foreign nationals was also raised, in particular the brutality and complete lack of empathy shown to the victims and their families. This, it was argued, is a perpetuation of the cycle of violence such as in Rwanda where the second genocide was perpetrated by the children of the perpetrators of the first genocide. Similarly the perpetrators in the cases of xenophobic violence in South Africa are the children of those involved in crime in the 1980s. Failure to intervene to assist the victims simply presents a recipe of what can be expected in the future.

Some panel members also stated that explanations for violence should not simply be rooted in economics, citing the example of Norway which while becoming richer, has seen increasing xenophobia. They argue that some groups have a vested interest in creating antagonism; this antagonism is used by the media to sell papers and by politicians to gain political leverage.

No true picture of migrancy

The mainstream media have reported on the belief that illegal immigrants own RDP houses, are taking jobs South African nationals can fill and are involved in crime. However there are no real statistics to support these claims. Panel members were careful to note that the absence of statistics is not unique to South Africa, especially with the last census carried out in as far back as 2001. However, research has revealed that foreigners are not disproportionately involved in crime, i.e. they are no more likely to be involved in crime than South Africans. In fact, the numbers of offenders who are foreign nationals have remained consistent and low over a period of time. Foreigners are more likely to contribute to crime statistic as victims than as offenders.

Many migrants do not come to South Africa indefinitely; rather there is constant cross border movement. There is a need to move away from thinking of migration as over-inflated and exhausting attempts to determine if migrant populations are in fact better or worse off than South Africans. Rather, urban populations in South Africa are mobile populations and the challenge remains to develop a comprehensive strategy to deliver services to a mobile population. In addition to this the history of Africa is history of migrancy. Migration has been at the core of African life and certain groups should not be criminalised for their attempts at economic survival.

Participants also cautioned against the process of “pathologizing” those involved in the xenophobic violence. This, they argue, is another process of “otherisation”, with the perpetrators now becoming the “other”. In this “otherisation” process, the perpetrators of the violence are branded ‘barbaric’, and are seen as different from the ‘normal’ South Africans, who don’t want to associate themselves with the violence, although they might have been keen spectators or might have privately condoned it.

CLOSING

Ms Mogapi thanked the participants and panel members for a dynamic session and the depth of the debates. She summed up some the key points raised, focusing in particular on the need to find a balance between acknowledging grievances around poverty and service delivery and articulating that acts of violence recently witnessed is unacceptable. The link between xenophobia, socio economic conditions and violence are complex and must be analysed and unpacked further.

Participants were asked to contemplate on the brutal nature of the attacks in order to question whether South Africa’s history and its collective psyche have contributed to producing this violence.

The forum highlighted key theoretical components of the concept of xenophobia. It is hoped that the information and debates presented would serve as discussion points for future debates in other settings.