Communities at war: Labelling perspective on hostility between communities and illicit immigrants in South Africa

Thabiso Malatji (a) & Kholofelo Rakubu (b)

(a) Lecturer, Department of Public Administration, University of Limpopo, R717: Zaneen Road and University Street, Mankweng Township, Polokwane, 0727, South Africa
(b) Associate Professor, Department of Safety and Security Management, Tshwane University of Technology, Aubrey Matlakala Street, Soshangwe, Pretoria, 0001, South Africa

Abstract

Despite all the migration policies implemented in South Africa and the world at large, the illicit immigrants continue to suffer in the hands of the host communities. This paper seeks to address the challenges and experiences of illegal immigrants in South Africa and the hostility by the host communities. In this qualitative study, linguistic data was collected through the focus group discussions with illicit immigrants from different countries in the African continent as well as the blinded focus group with communities in Limpopo province. The aim of the study was to explore the hostile environment that the illicit immigrants find themselves in while in South Africa and the problem of integration with the host communities. Findings from this study revealed that the illicit immigrants continue to become a problem in the receiving communities, and this is because they are snatching job opportunities for the locals since they do not mind exercising cheap labour, that’s is why there is tension between them and the locals. Most employers prioritise employing illicit immigrants instead of the locals. Furthermore, the participants indicated that the immigrants continue to temper with job security in the host communities. The researcher conducted two focus group discussions, one consisted of illicit immigrants from different African countries like Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi and Burundi, and the other focus group with the locals as blind group discussion. This is conceptualized as fear or black-on-black hatred which is also famously known as Afrophobia.

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Introduction

This paper seek to explore the hostility between the illicit immigrants and the host communities in South Africa. Illicit immigrants continue to suffer in the hands of the host communities in South Africa. The receiving communities perceive the illicit immigrants as a threat to job security. South Africans face a postcolonial conundrum of how to handle immigrants who arrive across borders that are inherently porous, borders of colonial origin, and paradoxically symbolic of sovereignty. However, there are concerns about the connection between immigration and crime which have a long-standing history in the United States (US), dating back to colonial times. It is believed that increased immigration is associated with increased criminal activities in the receiving countries. African foreign nationals are feared, hated and distrusted (Isike and Isike, 2012).

In his famous words, Malatji (2021), he mentioned that illicit immigration is not new to South Africa, it has always been part of regional migration to South Africa for decades. South Africa continue to become a dangerous and hostile place for non-nationals, more especially those from the rest of the African continent. As claimed by the media, South Africans are Xenophobic and they attack their fellow black brothers, Africans experience verbal and physical abuse irrespective of whether they are in the country with or without documents and they make life difficult for non-nationals. Lack of service delivery by the government worsen the situation because the locals and the illicit immigrants end up fighting for the limited resources (Crush and Peberdy, 2018).
The high level of xenophobia is directed to both youth and old persons who happen to find themselves in the country, black African migrants and refugees, common stereotypes include allegations that African migrants import diseases and crime, they are labelled as people who steal jobs and women drain the health care system and other state resources. Some of the government institutions target the illicit immigrants, just like the police force, they arrest and harass them. It is also believed that this xenophobic attacks are rooted in poverty, crime and high unemployment rate. It is just not attacks on foreign nationals alone but frustrations that nonnationals and locals go through (Solomon and Kosaka, 2013, Opfermann, 2020). The empirical data presented in this article reveal that illicit immigrants find it hard to integrate with the communities and they feel like they do not belong to the community, they are segregated and isolated.

As highlighted by Mpofu(2018) in his paper ‘Church as hostile, host or home’ the presence of migrants and refugees in different communities in South Africa constitutes a serious challenge to the host communities, they bring along their culture and language, which will somehow dilute the original language of the communities. Some of them have kids with the locals and the kids now grow up mixing the local language and that of the father who is an outsider. It was observed by Tella, (2016) the South African state perceives immigrants, especially undocumented African immigrants, as a threat to the social fabric and economic survival of the South Africa.

This paper examines the difficulties and experiences of illegal immigrants in South Africa, as well as the hostility of the receiving communities. In this qualitative study, linguistic data was gathered through focus group discussions with illegal immigrants from various African countries and a blinded focus group with Limpopo Province communities.

Furthermore, the purpose of the study was to investigate the hostile environment that illegal immigrants face in South Africa as well as the issue of integration with the host communities.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

Researchers in the field of social sciences use labelling theory to try to understand a particular phenomenon that is being studied. Labelling theory takes interests in the social processes whereby certain people are defined as different by society. Moreover, this involves certain power dynamics in different societies in which a certain group of people wants to control another group of people. In most cases, these groups are found to be disturbing and destabilise social order and that is why they are labelled and given names. This makes the group to feel like they don’t belong because they are different (Sjostrom, 2017). Subsequently, the idea of deviants is best described as a process of interaction between those labelled deviants and those doing the labelling. The group that is doing the labelling is the one that wants to be in charge and feel the power. The interactionist perspective, at least in theory, thus focuses as much on those defining deviants as on those perceived as deviants (Pietersen, 1997).

The labelling theory is relevant is a situation where the youth committed delinquent and felonious activities, the community or society would label them as criminals, and they would consequently receive adverse treatment that suit their character. The delinquent tag would impact their self-identity and act as a catalyst, driving the youth to recommit criminal activities again. Tannenbaum in (1938) regards this tagging of criminals as dramatization of evil to describe the process of marginalizing youth offenders. Tannenbaum further indicated that the process of making a criminal as a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, emphasizing, making conscious and self-conscious, it becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasizing, and evoking the very traits that the power group complained of. The delinquent labels or the tags given by society to youth offenders does not intend to change their self-image and self-concept. The label should serve as society’s response to the activities but not to the delinquent youths themselves. However, if the youth’s self-concept and self-identity are weak, they would likely recommit criminal activities (Nguyen, 2021).

This theory is very relevant in this study because it addresses the problems of tag which the illicit immigrants suffer in the hands of the host communities. They are segregated and called criminals, rapists, kwerekwere and this makes them feel like they are criminals because the community sees them as such, even if they are not. The illicit immigrants would still be regarded as criminals and thieves who must leave the country for the locals because of absence of social cohesion.

**Hostility between communities and immigrants in South Africa**

The tension between the host nation and the immigrants is not a new thing in South Africa; it has been going in for while whereby the locals have always been against the presence of the immigrants due to many reasons like stealing jobs and committing crime. There is a very negative interpretation by quite a number of South Africans that the foreigners are stealing jobs and bring along the bad things in the country including the diseases, hence they are treated differently more especially by those who do not have information and knowledge about where the immigrants come from and why they are in the country (Danso and McDonald, 2001).

By the year 2020 various community based groups started to mobilise around an anti-immigrant agenda. Amongst the groups were Operation DuDuLa that was taking the lead in this anti-immigrant agenda which started in Soweto and it has since opened branches in other provinces if not all over the country, and the unrelated Dudula movement is based in the Johannesburg township of Alexandra. Dudula is a Zulu word and isiZulu is one of the official language spoken in South Africa, and the term Dudula simply means to push. The community groups want to push the immigrants or outsiders out of the country. Moreover, the problem with the
community groups is that there is a high level of crime in the country, which is as a result of high volume of illicit immigrants in the country. The groups claim that the government is failing to deliver services because of immigrants who are benefiting from the public services including health services and free education that is provided by the state. These are the socio economic crisis that the country is facing and the anti-immigrants groups are blaming the illicit immigrants for such problems (Kazimboni, Lacaster, Machabaphala and Mulaudzi, 2022).

A study by Mpofu (2018) indicate that the hostility directed towards foreign nationals migrants in South Africa exposes them to vulnerability as they are constantly under threat of violence, and they feel ashamed as they lack recognition as human beings with a dignity because they are in a foreign land. This is a clear hatred by black against black, however there are certain groups of foreigners in South Africa but because they are not black, no one is saying anything about them. The locals in South Africa see blacks from African continent as the only foreigners in their country simply because they are in the country to make a living and to seek asylum. The immigrants accept the little offer that they are given by the employers while in the country, hence the locals are not really impressed with that because they see this as stealing jobs and majority of South Africans believed that immigrants create unemployment and drain the country’s economic resources (Matsinhe, 2011, Crush, Chikanda and Tawodzera, 2015, Cinini and Balgobind, 2019).

Crime is a serious concern to the government and South Africans at large because it is a threat to the safety and security of African foreign nationals. Moreover, crime can be committed at any time anywhere in this country and is a national problem affecting both foreigners and local citizens. Anyone can commit a crime regardless of their nationality, there are sentiments that foreigners are the criminals in the country at large. This view of foreigners as criminals does not happen in South Africa only, but also elsewhere in host countries and communities (Cinini and Balgobind, 2019).

Scapegoating tendencies and public rhetoric in host communities

The host communities in South Africa believe that the foreign nationals are in the country to steal and destroy. While immigrants from other African countries especially in the SADC region with shared ethnic characteristics to South Africans, like Botswana, Lesotho and eSwatini, are generally more tolerated, immigrants from other African countries like Zimbabwe and Democratic Republic of Congo are disliked and referred to as makwerekwere. The Mozambicans are tolerated in the Northern part of Limpopo province, like in Elim and Malamulele because of the similar language and culture (Kazimboni, Lacaster, Machabaphala and Mulaudzi, 2022).

As Bloch (2010) note, foreign nationals in South Africa can experience xenophobia and violence either legally or illegally, with some arguing that this is a consequence of the isolation caused by apartheid regime. During the year 2008, South Africa experienced violent racist and xenophobic attacks in most part of Gauteng which aimed mainly at foreign nationals from Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Violence extends from civil society through to the police, with illicit immigrants subjected to extortion and victimization by the South African police force. Illicit immigrants can be more vulnerable to potential abuses than other migrants in South Africa (Morreira, 2010).

Immigrants from different part of the world left their countries of origin and fled to South Africa in expectation of a safe and secure future. However, the immigrants from the African countries became the targets of blame for many South Africans' poverty and lack of service delivery. There are high possibilities that new immigrants could be expected to struggle to understand the hostility that they encountered. The abuse that the immigrants are going through is unbearable, they are abused, verbally and physically, in trains and in buses and in taxis and in different communities (Vromans, Schweitzer, Knoetze and Kagge, 2011). Regardless of their origins and motives, and thus their likely legal status in the country, almost everyone had encountered negative attitudes from people with whom they came into contact in their everyday lives, including their neighbours (Dodson, 2010).

According to Crush, Ramachandran and Pendleton (2013), majority of the South Africans continue to believe that migrants and refugees pose a real danger to the country's economic and social security.

Social cohesion in host countries

There is no agreed accepted definition of social cohesion in the international literature, however, some social theorists described socially cohesive society as one where all groups have a sense of belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition and legitimacy. These positive attributes of cohesion, they are often supplemented by reference to negative variables such as isolation, exclusion, non-involvement, rejection and illegitimacy as examples and perceptions of the absence of cohesion and this will make immigrants to always feel like outsiders. All governments have a role to play in influencing social cohesion in a number of ways, including human rights legislation, investment in social development and shaping immigration policy. There is a need for greater understanding and monitoring of the impact of settlement policy on outcomes for migrants and their families, and the community at large (Spoonley, Peace, Butcher and O’Neill, 2005).

According to Montreuil, Bourhis, and Vanbeselaere (2004) majority of host community members who endorse the assimilationist, segregationist or exclusionist orientations have in common the rejection of immigrants or their cultural specificities, and the immigrants are afraid of practising their culture. The assimilationist orientation corresponds to the traditional concept of absorption
whereby host community members expect immigrants to relinquish their cultural identity for the sake of adopting the culture of the majority host society.

Research and Methodology

The researcher engaged in qualitative research methodology. A qualitative research is a method of inquiry can be employed in many different academic disciplines, traditionally in the social sciences. The aim of the researcher in a qualitative study is to collect in great details and the understanding of the human behaviour, and the result that led to such kind of behaviour. Furthermore, qualitative research method examine and answers important questions of how, where, what, when and why a person would act in a certain way toward a specific matter (Oun and Bach, 2014). In this study, the researcher was trying to understand the behaviour of the subjects in a group so that they can share their experiences, this methodology was found to be very relevant and helps achieve such goal.

Biographical Details

The researcher used focus group discussions to collect linguistic data for this study and interviews were conducted with the community members as blinded host community and another one with illicit immigrants. To avoid being biased, the researcher mixed the gender in both groups. The participants in both groups were at the age of between 25 and 40. In the blinded focus group, there were 6 males and 4 females and in the illicit immigrants group there were 4 males and 6 females. All members in the immigrant group are married or living with their partners, all females are unemployed while the males are doing part time jobs, and some work in farms just to support their families. The illicit group consisted of immigrants or refugees from Democratic Republic of Cong, Burundi and Zimbabwe.

Sampling Techniques

The researcher utilised simple random selection to choose members of the local community for a blinded focus group discussion. In another focus group, the same sampling methodology was used to sample illicit immigrants. Simple random sampling is a sampling strategy in which a predetermined number of items (population) are chosen at random from the whole population in such a manner that any potential combination is equally likely to be the sample chosen (Meng, 2013).

Target Population

The target population in this study was illicit immigrants from different African countries and the host communities. Target Population, according to Malatji (2017 and Kgwefane 2014) they define it as a set of groups or individuals from which a sample is drawn or taken in order to learn or study them.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Musina town, Limpopo Province. Musina town was previously known as Messina and it is situated in the Vhembe Region of the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Being the most northern town in South Africa, Musina is close to the border of Zimbabwe. The growth of the town was largely due to the rich copper deposits found here. Iron ore, magnetite, graphite, coal, semi-precious stones and diamonds are mined in this region.

Data Collection Technique

Qualitative field research was employed in this study where the participants were interviewed in a group as a Focus Group Discussion, this was very relevant in the sense that Focus group discussion is used recurrently as a qualitative approach to try and gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. According to Mishra (2016) focus group is a type of in-depth interview accomplished in a group of participants who are gathered and present characteristics defined with respect to the proposal, size, composition, and interview procedures. This encourage interaction amongst the participants. During the discussion, the participants influence each other and they interact through their answers to the ideas and contributions during the discussion. The researcher as the facilitator has the responsibility to stimulates discussion with comments, as issues are being discussed (Escalada and Heong, 2009).

Findings and Discussions

Synthesizing findings from two focus group discussions (blinded focus group discussion)

Aggressions by community members because of presence of illicit immigrants in South Africa

It was revealed in this study through the focus group discussion with the host communities in Musina, Limpopo province that the government should not waste resources that belongs to the locals and cater the foreigners, they must just go back home to where they come from. It is very unfair for the government of this country to cater the needs of those fleeing their country for reasons known to them. They must be deported back to their home country if found to be in this country illegally.

“We know Africa is for Africans, but they have their origin country, they must remain there and solve their problems”

Members of the community in this group discussion do not necessarily have problems with the immigrants; however, they are worried of the fact that the government is using the little available resources to cater for the immigrants including illicit immigrants.
The group’s response regarding the presence of illicit immigrants in their community was clarified and they have indicated that it is very much disturbing since they use illegal means to come to South Africa. Most of them even end up committing heavy and multiple crimes that they cannot even be held accountable for since they are undocumented. It is very dangerous that they come in the country illegally and become a threat to the domestic security. Even the law enforcement agencies are struggling to address the problem of illicit immigrants because they do not know where to start. All participants in the group agreed that the presence of the illicit immigrants has become a real nuisance to the community, and this is because they are snatching job opportunities for the locals since they do not mind exercising cheap labour. Most employers then substitute the locals with these immigrants, and it is not good, they are tempering with the job security in this community.

“We don’t want them here; they must go back” Said one respondent.

Somewhat, the employers in the private sector contribute to this hostility by not ensuring that there is balance in terms of employment. Moreover, the employers want to maximise their profits and they would rather prefer to exploit the stranded refugees and economic migrants in the country instead of employing the local people. The best way to address the problem on illicit immigrants and unemployment in the country is if the government and the private sector work together and make sure that all people benefits from the jobs created. Crush and Peberdy (2018) also revealed this in their study, Criminal Tendencies, Immigrants ad illegality in South Africa; they indicated that the private sector employs both undocumented and documented immigrants.

There was a mixture of feelings in the group discussion where very few participants agree that they do not have issue with illicit immigrants because they know their sufferings, they are humans as well and they are here to try and make a living. It is not fair to see those with a similar culture to yours suffering.

“We are all Africans” words from one group member.

The discussion continued with the community members and one the things they have highlighted was that the immigrants are now outnumbering the local community and they fear that they might experience the “banyamulenga” situation like in DRC. They do not want to flee their Musina town to elsewhere because the immigrants would take the town. The host community is worried about food security in the area and the level of crime that is committed by the illicit immigrants in the community. The way in which the immigrants are outnumbering the locals, one would think that they are no longer the real citizens of this community; they have taken over.

The effect of the presence of illicit immigrants on South African communities

The host communities believe that the presence of illicit immigrants has a serious effect in their daily lives. They further indicated that most of them use the local clinic, and when the locals go to the clinic they do not find any medication due to the high population of immigrants who daily go to the clinic to seek medication and that has a bad effect on them as a community, more especially those with chronic diseases. In other words, the illicit immigrants are a burden to the health sector.

The South African government provide services based on the statistics that they have, the available medication at the clinics should cater the counted population, provision of water is according to the number of people that the local government is serving. It will be difficult to cater for the people who are not even counted anywhere; hence, the host community will always have problems with the illicit immigrants. It is important to note that the host community is not against the immigrants in general, they just have issues with the illicit ones. The regular immigrants are not a problem because they are counted. Those are immigrants with good status. The government is being blamed for service delivery deficiencies and backlogs due to their existence (presence). Findings are in support of the findings of Mawadza (2008), in the nexus between Migration and human security, it was revealed that uncontrolled migration can also put a strain on social service delivery in the recipient country, through increased use of health and educational facilities and pressure for government sponsored housing.

“These people come into our country and settle for cheaper rates than ours as locals and as such they now threaten our job securities because, employers are now absorbing them instead of us. We now are unable to reduce the unemployment rate in the community or country at large due to their willingness that is absurd, it is very annoying and economically disturbing to us as the locals,” Said one participant.

Some of these illicit immigrants are criminals and the community is now complaining about their children being exposed to drugs, which is something new to this community. The community of Musina has never experienced such level of drug abuse before, it is only now that the borders are porous and people come in as they wish and they bring all this kind of drugs in the country.

Parents find it difficult to reprimand their children because they are now drug addicts due to illicit immigration. Our police have in turn given up on getting rid of the drugs on our streets because they have spread them all over the community and are armed with heavy weapons, we no longer feel safe in our own town. It is all a mess and chaotic. Immigrants have spread all over the communities; some are renting back rooms in the communities. When they stay in the communities, it means they are now part of the community and they must have access to basic needs like water, electricity etc. All this basic needs are provided through the public purse that is supposed to serve the locals, not outsider.
There is also mix marriages within the communities and this has a negative impact on the cultural practices because there are so many cultures now. The host communities feels like they cannot protect their culture at all because the community has so many cultures at this moment. People now are using local names and some even have ideas with the local names on them. In the next coming 50 years, we would not know who is who in this community. This is messing up a lot with our country’s legibility and credibility.

**Insights from focus group discussion with illicit foreign nationals integration with the locals in South Africa**

All participants answered the question on integration within the communities and they have indicated that they still face challenges more especially when coming to issues of employment or job opportunities. There are some people who believe that the immigrants are taking their jobs. The immigrants do not have work permits nor any documents, but they still manage to get some jobs and this is what makes the locals to be angry, hence the idea of integration is always a problem.

Some of the illicit immigrants believe that there will always be those locals who would treat foreigners like their brothers, and there are some who would make you feel like indeed you are in a foreign land. The participants do not want to go back to their home countries, even if the situation is bad in the host community. They would rather stay in South Africa and struggle to integrate with the communities than going back home. The issue of integration is not much of a problem because it does not threaten their lives.

The health practitioners at public hospitals are very un-receptive towards the immigrants; the treatment from the health officials is very bad. When the illegal immigrants visit the health facilities they asked where they come from. The moment the immigrants mention the country of origin then the treatment changes immediately and they start making you feel that you are in a foreign land, you start to feel it that you are a foreigner. Some of the immigrants were told and accused that they benefit from the South African tax, because they get medication that is meant for the locals. This kind of a situation make life difficult for the immigrants because they have nowhere to go since they are in the country.

At school sometimes, they ask of the documents, which they do not have. The kids are given tough times by educators at school asking for the passports of parents which majority do not have. This is a serious problem because if you do not have documents, this will affect your kids as well. One respondent who came to South Africa illegally in 2007 mentioned that he was asked to produce passport which he did not have because he flee his country and he did not have time to get documents. When the immigrants are asked to produce such documents more especially those who came to South Africa seeking refugee, they feel like they are not welcomed in the country. Immigrants believe that the people who asked for documents when they come to South Africa are those who have never experienced this kind of problems; they do not know what people from DRC, Burundi and other countries experience, more especially those coming from countries where there are conflicts and people are being killed every day. The situation is very bad in the origin country and staying in South Africa even if not really integrated with the communities is better than being in a country where there is turmoil.

People in this country, especially community members do not know what immigrants go through in their own countries. Imagine coming from DRC or Ruanda, you are running and fear for your life, it is not like you have planned to flee your country. Most of them who come to South Africa think they are safe in South Africa because they believe that the locals paint all of them in the same brush. The immigrants feel like they are safe in South Africa even though they experience problems of hostility from the people who are expected to treat them like brothers and sisters.

It is very tough in some of the communities where there is turmoil. When you come to South Africa and people do not understand because they do not know what you going through. It will take time for the host communities to integrate with the outsiders peacefully because they think that they are in their communities to steal and to destroy their communities. However, not all immigrants are criminals, there are those who are law-abiding immigrants but the locals paint all of them in the same brush. The immigrants feel like they are safe in South Africa even though they experience problems of hostility from the people who are expected to treat them like brothers and sisters.

**Conclusions**

Refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants in South Africa continue to receive bad treatment from the host communities and to some extent from some of the practitioners in the public sector. The immigrants are treated as criminals who are in the country to promote crime and steal people’s jobs. There is no any form of integration between the communities and the immigrants. However, the communities are worried about lack of accountability and service delivery by the government and take out all their frustrations on the immigrants. The government is failing the locals by not prioritising service delivery and create enough jobs for the people of the country, so that there will be no one blames for stealing jobs. Services, which are meant for the communities, are now benefiting people who are not known, and the issue of human rights is being ignored. Immigrants and refugees, either illicit or documented, they are still humans and their rights must be respected and they deserve to be treated with respect. Illicit immigrants and refugees are not welcomed in most part of the country, especially where the government is failing to service its people. They are used as scapegoats for government and private sector failures.

Based on the conclusions, it can be recommended that there must be a good working relationship between the government and the private sector because the private sector is the one employing the immigrants mostly. The private sector should do away with
exploiting and prioritising immigrants to maximise their profits, they should employ both locals and immigrants, provided the immigrants have documents, which identify them. It is further recommended that the public sector should be held accountable on service delivery backlogs because the community end up taking their frustrations to immigrants when the government is failing. There is lack of information at the community level regarding the push factor of migration. It is therefore recommended that the local leadership work closely with the community members and educate the community about the situation especially in the African countries like DRC, this will help the host community to understand that in countries where there are conflicts, you cannot expect the refugees to come to South Africa with documents. All that the community can do is to engage the leadership of the community about the presents of the illicit immigrants so that the whole community together with leaders can help accommodate the refugees and ensure that they get services and the exercise their human rights.

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