

Immigration can strengthen communities by bringing new skills and new ideas that could help improve the economic and social livelihoods of a society. The National Development Plan outlines an important role for migration in the country, linking immigration with economic development and with part of the solution to South Africa's human capital deficits. Many people in KZN do not share this viewpoint, and do not believe that foreign immigrants are generally good for South Africa's economy or that foreigners make the country more open to new ideas and cultures. If we compare KwaZulu-Natal with other parts of the country, we do not detect a considerable difference between responses recorded in the province and the national average (Figure 4). Despite government efforts to promote tolerance, most of the adult population could not see the value of immigration.

The 2013 SASAS results for KwaZulu-Natal were broken down by a range of socioeconomic attributes in order to provide more insight into the patterns of xenophobic sentiment within the province. The results (not shown) suggested that people across the province's socioeconomic spectrum tended to hold an anti-immigrant opinion. Low levels of variation were noted between age cohorts, population groups, labour market status or by level of educational attainment. This evidence challenges the popular tendency to identify xenophobia as the 'problem' of one particular group (such as the youth or the unemployed) in the province. In this respect, KwaZulu-Natal was found not to differ from other parts of the country.

Conclusion

The attitudinal analysis presented in this article confirms that the xenophobic sentiment in KwaZulu-Natal is shared by a considerable share of the province's adult population. Despite efforts to encourage and enforce a culture of human rights, people from across the socioeconomic divide in the province continue to express negative attitudes towards foreign nationals. However, it is important to remember that KwaZulu-Natal is not atypical relative to other provinces in the country. Most provinces in South Africa tend to be home to significant shares of people who voice anti-immigrant opinions.

Given government-sponsored initiatives in recent years to build social cohesion and create spaces for positive societal integration, the results of this study are disquieting. The April 2015 attacks call into question the success of current efforts to combat intolerance and xenophobia in our society. Leaders in government and civil society should be applauded for their condemnation of the April attacks. However the results of this study suggest that the underlying problem of widespread xenophobia is not being addressed with the necessary effort required. ■

Authors: Steven Gordon, PhD researcher; Benjamin Roberts and Jarè Struwig, SASAS coordinators; in the HSRC's Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery (DGSD) programme, HSRC.

Who is a foreigner in South Africa?

It is not only people from outside South Africa who are regarded as 'foreigners'.

Hangwelani (Hope) Magidimisha, a Tshivenda-speaker from Limpopo, relates how she was advised to stay in her house in KwaZulu-Natal during the recent xenophobic attacks that gripped that province.



Your accent and the 'shades of black' of your skin are still used as a measure of being a 'foreigner', even for South Africans. It seems tribalism is alive and well in our country. I have personal experience of this.

I grew up in a very poor rural area in Limpopo. We used to fetch water from the river for cooking and drinking, spending hours chasing locusts and termites for relish. My parents' daily refrain was that 'education is the only weapon' that could rescue me from this situation. This made me work hard at school so I could qualify to go to university. I was motivated by dreams of studying in Durban, visiting the beach and enjoying the splendid infrastructure and Durban lifestyle.

Little did I know that by moving out of my home town, an unimaginable challenge awaited me.

South Africans' ignorance of South Africa

During registration for my first year at university in Durban, I met a beautiful young woman who introduced herself to me as Hlengiwe, a second year Master's student. I wanted to congratulate her on her achievement as a post-graduate, but before I could she asked me, 'Are you from here?' My heart started pounding. What did she mean by 'here'? Did she mean KZN, Westville campus or the country?

She pronounced that people
who looked like me were not
from South Africa.

She surely could not be asking whether I was from South Africa? 'No,' I reluctantly answered, but why did she ask the question? With great confidence she pronounced that people who looked like me were not from South Africa. My complexion and accent made it easy to conclude that I was a foreigner.

As she was saying all this, my whole body went numb; I felt excluded, unwelcome and discriminated against. She asked me again where I came from. 'Limpopo,' I said. To my surprise she retorted, 'Which border post did you use when coming into South Africa?'

As I stood there struggling to come to terms with her response, especially being labelled a foreigner in my own country, she asked if I had a passport. As this drama was unfolding I thought that my geographical knowledge was being put to test. It suddenly dawned on me, this second year Master's student did not know Limpopo was in South Africa.

This initial incident became the preamble for similar encounters that were to follow. In the malls, churches, university, salons, parking lots... everywhere I went, I found myself having to defend my identity and lecturing people on the geographical location of the Limpopo province. It also made me realise why some of my foreign friends had resorted to bleaching their skin – to hide their identity in an effort to be assimilated into the society.

There are still South Africans
who do not know the spatial
location of South African
provinces.

From these encounters it is clear – and very sad – that there are still some South Africans who do not know the spatial location of South African provinces and the languages of the country they live in. What is even more worrying is the way in which some South Africans use skin colour, accent and physical features to characterise 'the others' as foreigners.

South is
a direction and
Africa is a continent.
We are all Africans!

We are all Africans

They seem to be oblivious to the rapid integration that is taking place among Africans, of intermarriages, and the forces of globalisation. Instead of embracing the similarities among Africans, they use differences between people as a tool to discriminate and label people. Common sense will tell you that we have those similarities because we share the same roots. South is a direction and Africa is a continent. We are all Africans!

I refuse to be excluded in my
own country because of my
skin colour and accent.

This is not an apologetic note for a crime I did not commit. I do not have a study permit, visa or work permit I can show, because I do not need one. I am a South African-born child who proudly speaks Tshivenda. Some of my 'local' friends I have successfully educated about the spatial location of South African provinces advised me to stay indoors as xenophobic attacks mounted. I found myself having to use sign languages when greeting people because of the fear of being labelled a foreigner due to my accent and beaten to death by the so-called 'locals'.

I refuse to be excluded in my own country because of my skin colour and my accent. I will not bleach my skin to meet others' ideas of how I should fit into my country. I refuse to live in fear of being beaten to death due to xenophobic violence in my own country. I refuse to be a victim of misleading 'local' characterisation and wrongfully labelling migrants.

As a mother of two, I also refuse to let my children be contaminated by the demons of xenophobia and ignorance. I have therefore begun to teach my children about the country they live in and the many beautiful languages spoken. I have decided to use my pen, the most powerful tool I possess, to send tough and clear messages to all perpetrators of xenophobia, in all its guises, that this madness has to stop! ■

Author: Hangwelani (Hope) Magidimisha is a PHD's intern in the Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery programme, HSRC.