

ARE SOUTH AFRICANS XENOPHOBIC? MIGRATION POLICIES NEED TO SUPPORT INTEGRATION

In January this year, violence erupted again in Rustenburg, North West, and news reports carried descriptions of homes burned and shops looted. The riots were allegedly sparked by rumours in the community that the police were involved with foreign-born drug dealers. South Africans need to ask questions about the state of social cohesion within our country, write *Drs Steven Gordon, Gilbert Fokou, Yul Derek Davids and Prof Narnia Bohler-Muller.*

The recent violence in Rustenburg brought back memories of the earlier 2017 anti-immigrant riots in Pretoria and the burning question of whether this collective mayhem was motivated by hatred of international migrants.

Rumours (such as the involvement of police with foreign-born drug dealers) are common in South Africa's townships where drug trafficking is often attributed to the presence of foreigners.

This is clearly shown in public opinion data from the South African Social Attitude Survey (SASAS).

A nationally representative research project, SASAS surveys the South African population (16 years and older) living in private households in all nine provinces.

Figure 1, (below) presents data on whether the general public agreed or disagreed that immigrants in South Africa increased crime rates for the period 2008-2016.

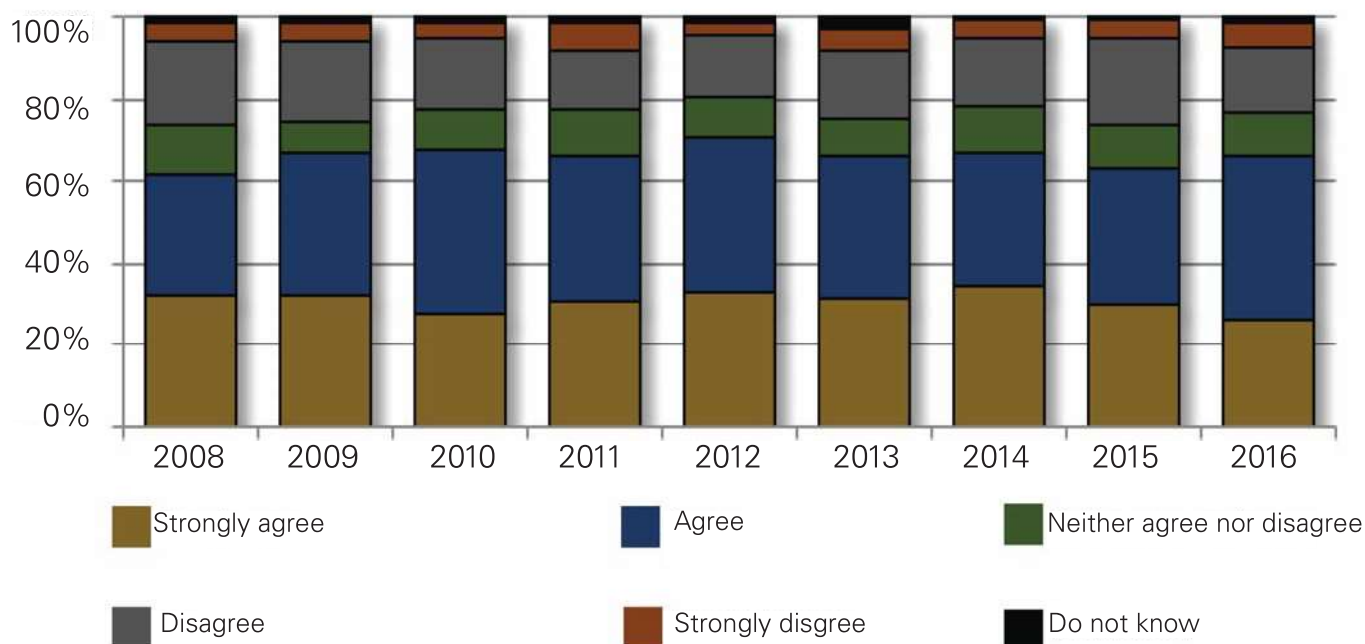
The results show that 62% of the adult population agreed with the statement that immigrants increased crime in 2008. This belief strengthened over the period.

In 2016, 66% of the general public agreed with the statement. The SASAS data portrayed here shows the widespread nature of anti-immigrant stereotypes in the country.

Former Police Minister Fikile Mbalula condemned the violence, requested communities to work with police and not to take the law into their own hands.

He emphasised that "people must know we are a democratic state, with competent institutions to resolve these matters"; media reported.

How much do you agree that immigrants increase crime rates?



During such moments of violence, our natural predisposition is to advocate for the return of law and order.

We ask the authorities to - in a rough and ready manner - punish and curtail the activities of those responsible for the violence.

Obviously, lawlessness cannot be tolerated and the police should protect the lives and property of the country's foreign-born population.

However, a socially cohesive society is not maintained solely through the strong-arm of law and order.

Vulnerable to discrimination

There are approximately three million international migrants living in South Africa and the government's National Development Plan has mapped a future in which the size of the migrant population will only grow.

The South African Constitution, and the country's national social cohesion strategy, has committed our government to protect these migrants from discrimination and help integrate them into our society. But South Africa has not adopted a clear and coherent integration policy for the integration of foreign nationals.

As a result, many migrants are isolated from their host communities which makes them vulnerable to discrimination. The July 2017 White Paper on International Migration for South Africa acknowledged this failure. The authors of the White Paper attributed this to the country's lack of a common vision on the value of international migration.

Many nations face the challenge of how to integrate international migrants into a host society. For instance, a number of politicians in North America and Western Europe oppose the prospect of integrating international migrants.

They often base their opposition on reactionary prejudices towards people of colour. Despite this negative trend, it is still possible to learn positive lessons from these countries about integration. Since 2007, for example, Germany has had a National Integration Plan, which provides local and state officials with a framework for conducting immigrant integration programmes.

These programmes include language, civic and cultural courses that help migrants to fully participate to the life and activities of their host communities while sharing their own values with others. Following the

2015/2016 refugee crisis in Europe, this approach to integration was not abandoned but reinforced by new legislation.

The Canadian model of integration, based on coherent immigration selection, settlement, citizenship, and multiculturalism policies, has also been largely successful in terms of integrating newcomers.

This success is based on the convergence of historical, geographical, political, and cultural factors.

The Canadian approach towards integration in which various social groups coexist while conserving their characters, features and values has evolved overtime to reflect shifting needs and considerations.

Integration is not assimilation; it is a dynamic two-way process that requires citizens of host nations to learn to be more tolerant of international migrants.

Holistic approach

One of the lessons that other experiences can teach South Africa is that integration is not assimilation. We must develop various programmes across all layers of government and it must not be the responsibility of just one department or agency.

An integration strategy must involve a holistic approach that incorporates multiple factors and sectors (including, for example, education or awareness, law enforcement, service delivery, housing and labour markets).

Moreover, different levels of government must work with civil society organisations (such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) to manage the integration of migrants.

Ultimately, the goal of integration is to encourage newcomers to contribute to the country's economic, social, political and cultural development.

However, integration is a dynamic two-way process that requires citizens of host nations to learn to be more tolerant of international migrants.

One of the central tasks of integration policy in South Africa is to prevent anti-immigrant violence, but such a policy must not only focus on violence prevention.

By concentrating only on extreme types of anti-immigrant behaviour (like violence) we lose sight of the harmful potential of anti-immigrant sentiment. Many people hold prejudicial opinions about foreigners but do not act on these opinions.

Rather they merely pass these opinions on to their friends, family and co-workers. Under the right conditions, such opinions become a fertile soil that can reap a crop of prejudicial antagonistic behaviour. To resolve the problem, programmes to promote attitudinal change must be buttressed by the formation and maintenance of specially designed community-based conflict resolution structures and processes.

It requires courage

The White Paper on International Migration has identified integration of international migrants as one of the country's immigration policy priorities. For integration programmes to be effective they will require significant investment from the public purse.

However, the spending of public money on integration programmes may be toxic in the current climate of public opinion. Politicians must show courage in the face of such opposition and support integration policies. In the long-term, such policies will benefit the country economically and culturally. Therefore, the South African government has a crucial role to play in promoting a multi-cultural and non-racial society.

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