

Combating anti-immigrant hate: Public voices and government response

Summary

The National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (hereafter the NAP) outlines a broad-based strategy to combat anti-immigrant hate crime¹ in South Africa. However, the NAP is on the whole only a technical framework and the development of more detailed anti-xenophobia programmes is needed. To assist with the creation of such programmes, this policy brief examines anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviours in South Africa. Contemporary data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) series (2015 to 2018) is used for this analysis.

Responses in successive surveys detail the scale of anti-immigrant attitudes in the country, showing that a minority (albeit a substantial one) of the adult population would be open to participating in xenophobic hate crime. This analysis is limited in its scope and does not look at specific episodes of violence. The brief offers a targeted set of recommendations to assist policymakers in building effective anti-xenophobia programmes. Shifting public attitudes should be part of a broader strategy to address the root causes of violence and the recommendations outlined in this brief cover a variety of areas.

Background

Adopted by Cabinet in February 2019, the NAP signals the clear commitment of the government to combat xenophobia. Providing definitive clarity on the issue, xenophobia is defined in the document as an 'attitudinal orientation of hostility against non-nationals in a given population'. Developed through a multi-year comprehensive consultation process that involved multiple stakeholders, the plan outlines guiding principles and directives that policymakers can use to develop anti-xenophobia interventions. However, the NAP does not propose detailed

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1. This term refers to a crime motivated (at least in part) by prejudice in which the victim(s) is targeted because of their membership (either real or perceived) in a social group – in this case, membership of a foreign national group. Such crimes may include physical assault, verbal abuse or damage to property. Although 'hate crime' is a recognised term, at the time of writing South Africa does not have hate crime legislation. The Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill (B9 – 2018) is expected to be reintroduced in Parliament in the financial year 2019/2020.

criteria (budgets, oversight mechanisms, evaluation standards and so on) for what such interventions should look like.

Government anti-xenophobia interventions are currently coordinated through three principal inter-ministerial committees (IMCs): the IMC on Social Cohesion, the IMC on Migration and the IMC on Population Policy. Government efforts are also informed by the National Investigative Hearing on Migration, Xenophobia and Social Cohesion held by the South African Human Rights Commission in February 2018. Despite a clear commitment to address the issue, policymakers are often confronted by a lack of quality data on how to change public attitudes towards foreign nationals.² Frequently the IMCs have to work with fragmented and, at times, contradictory sources of information. This has had a negative impact on the anti-xenophobia efforts of the government.

On issues related to xenophobia, one of the principal obstacles recognised by the drafters of the NAP was a lack of quality data. This was also an obstacle identified in previous investigations of anti-immigrant hate crime (such as by the Parliamentary Ad Hoc Joint Committee on Probing Violence Against Foreign Nationals and the Special Reference Group on Migration and Community Integration chaired by Judge Navi Pillay). Given the limited resources available, the government needs better quality data to be able to effectively target its anti-xenophobia efforts. The NAP itself acknowledges the need for greater research and monitoring.

2. It is important to recognise that the use of the term 'foreign national' can be problematic as it promotes othering. Indeed, the word 'foreign' derives from the Latin *foris* for 'outside' and it is with a sense of discomfort that the term is used here.

Table 1: Count ('000) of adult population who reported participation in anti-immigrant violence, 2015–2018

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Have done it in the past year	892 (2.41)	1 224 (3.24)	355 (0.90)	804 (1.99)
Have done it in the more distant past	1 272 (3.44)	2 052 (5.43)	1 673 (4.24)	2 966 (7.35)
Have not done it but might do it	4 869 (13.16)	3 827 (10.14)	4 592 (11.64)	4 468 (11.07)
Have not done it and would never do it	29 723 (80.34)	30 087 (79.69)	32 510 (82.43)	31 319 (77.58)
(Can't choose)	240 (0.65)	565 (1.50)	310 (0.79)	815 (2.02)

Source: SASAS 2015–2018

Note: The percentage of the total adult population of the country is in parenthesis.

Data

To gain an appreciation of what ordinary South Africans think about international migration, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) analysed SASAS data. The SASAS series consists of nationally representative, repeated cross-sectional surveys conducted annually by the HSRC since 2003.³ Designed as a time series, SASAS increasingly provides a unique, long-term account of the speed and direction of change in underlying public values in contemporary South Africa. This distinctive survey series enables us both to look closely at anti-immigrant behaviour and to examine public attitudes towards international migrants in the country.

Tracking hostility to international migration

Beginning in 2015, SASAS included the following question in its questionnaire: 'Have you taken part in violent action to prevent immigrants from living or working in your neighbourhood?' The results for the period 2015 to 2018 are

3. The sample consisted of adults aged 16 years and older living in private households in the country's nine provinces. The sample size for the survey is more than 3 000, with interviewing usually conducted between mid-November and mid-December.

presented in Table 1.⁴ A minority of the South African adult population reported that they had participated in this form of anti-immigrant aggression. The share of the general public who admitted to engaging in violence fluctuated within a very narrow band from 2015 to 2018. This demonstrates the durability in how honest respondents were when answering this question.

One of the most troubling findings of this study concerned possible participation in anti-immigrant aggression among non-participants. Worryingly, more than one in ten adults living in South Africa reported that they had not taken part in violent action against foreign nationals but would be prepared to do so. Given that there may be under-reporting of participation in anti-immigrant violence, this finding

4. People may be disinclined to disclose this type of potentially incriminating information during face-to-face interviews. However, researchers have been able to undertake community research on xenophobia among South African residents without serious problems (see Kerr et al. 2019 for an overview of this work). Still, the reader should be aware of possible under-reporting of anti-immigrant behaviour when reviewing the results of the survey (also see Claassen 2014).

is disturbing (for further discussion of this issue, see Gordon 2019a). Negative attitudes of this type provide fertile soil for community leaders and politicians who want to foment anti-immigrant hate crime for their own ends.⁵

The NAP acknowledges the reality of violent anti-immigrant hate crime in South Africa. Although this is a progressive move on the part of the government, such crime is not the only form in which xenophobia may manifest. Other forms of peaceful anti-immigrant discrimination are evident in South African society. The NAP, unfortunately, makes little mention of peaceful anti-immigrant actions. Recent research suggests that participation in such actions is often the first step in a process of escalation that can result in xenophobic violence (Gordon 2019b). Given that past participation in peaceful anti-immigrant activity is a major determinant of this type of violence, policymakers can consider non-violent anti-immigrant activity as an early warning sign of future violent anti-immigrant outbreaks.

Support for proposed efforts to combat xenophobia

The NAP includes a targeted set of actions to combat xenophobia that is centred on immigrant integration, awareness campaigns, improved migration management and increased access to constitutionally entitled rights. From SASAS data, we can see whether these actions enjoy public support. In the 2018 SASAS round, fieldworkers asked respondents the following: 'There are many different opinions about how to stop people taking violent action against foreigners living in South Africa. What do you think can be done to STOP attacks

5. Misago (2017) argues that anti-immigrant hate crime is facilitated by how South Africa's poor communities are governed. His research shows how anti-immigrant sentiments help to drive the outcomes of micro-level politics.

against foreigners living in the country?' The question was open-ended and this format encouraged survey participants to give an unbiased answer.

The most popular solutions put forward by the general public related to the management of immigrants and immigration (Figure 1). 22% of the adult population felt that expelling all (or most) immigrants from the country would solve the problem. 11% identified more restrictive border management as the best solution, while 8% said that foreigners should change their behaviour. Overall, 41% of the population put forward immigration factors when asked what the primary solution to anti-immigrant violence should be.

It should be noted that many of the proposals put forward in the NAP do have a degree of popular support. 16% of the general public favoured education and community-based strategies and 13% supported better law enforcement. However, it is also clear that the general public was divided on how xenophobia should be addressed, with many favouring solutions that could be described as prejudicial. Consequently, there may be a degree

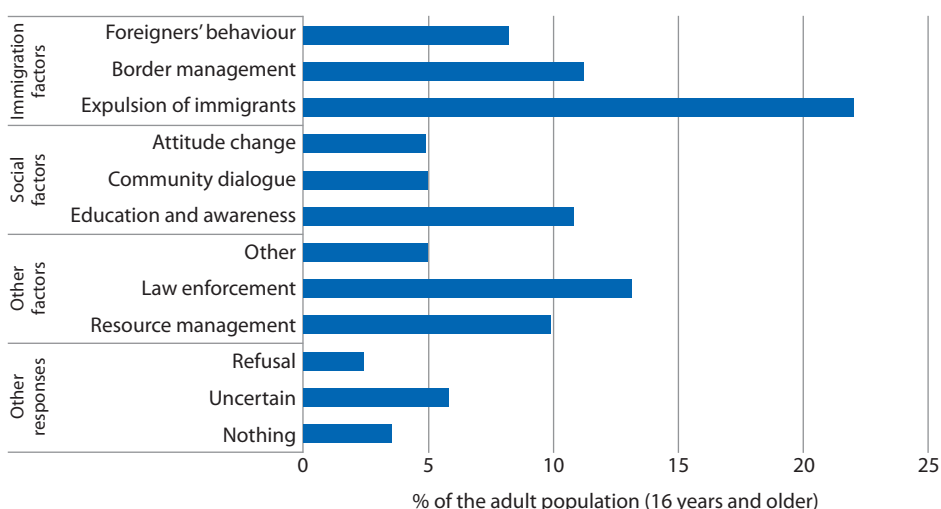
of public backlash against some of the anti-xenophobia efforts proposed by the government. Policymakers should be prepared for this eventuality.

What people think causes anti-immigrant violence influences the types of anti-xenophobia strategies they prefer. Research conducted by the HSRC on attitudes towards anti-immigrant hate crime points to prevalent 'victim precipitation' on this issue (Gordon 2019c) – that is, the belief that immigrants bring their victimisation upon themselves through their actions. Victim-blaming is dangerous as it demeans those affected by xenophobic violence and can diminish authorities' ability to prosecute perpetrators. Indeed, past studies (for example, by Steinberg 2012) accused the South African police of ignoring charges of hate crime against foreign nationals and of further victimisation of foreign complainants.

Knowledge and targeting for public awareness

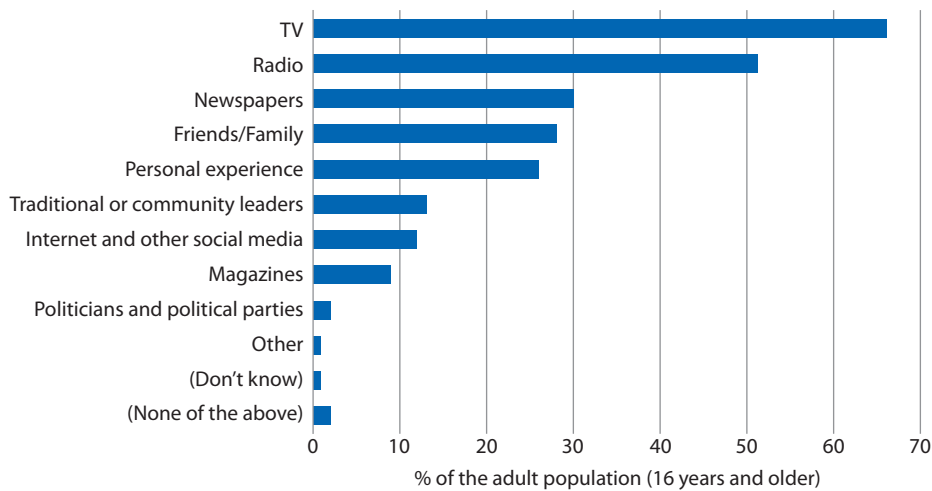
In its diagnosis of prejudice and discrimination, the NAP acknowledges misinformation and stereotyping as causal factors. The general public is

Figure 1: Main solutions proposed to solve anti-immigrant violence in South Africa (multiple responses)



Source: SASAS 2018

Figure 2: Most trusted sources of information on foreign nationals living in South Africa (multiple responses)



Source: SASAS 2018

often quite misinformed about foreign nationals. Consider, for example, the relatively simple issue of how many international migrants reside in South Africa. Demographers at the United Nations have estimated that there are about four million international migrants in the country (approximately 7% of the national population). According to data from the 2018 round of SASAS, the general public tend to overestimate the number of foreigners living in the country. In fact, the public was found (on average) to misjudge the number of foreigners as a share of the national population by as much as 30 percentage points.

Where does the general public get information on foreign nationals? In the 2018 SASAS round, survey participants were asked which sources they trusted to provide the best information on this subject. They were then read a list of different sources, ranging from traditional media platforms (for example, radio, television and newspapers) to more communal sources of information. The responses to this question are shown in Figure 2. As can be seen, the most popular sources of information were (perhaps unsurprisingly) television and radio. Interestingly, more than a quarter (28%) of the general public

identified interpersonal networks (friends and family) as an important source of information.

Past participants in anti-immigrant violence were found to be less likely than non-participants to identify interpersonal networks and personal experience as trusted sources of information on foreign nationals living in South Africa. This suggests the importance of these types of sources in driving non-participation in anti-immigrant hate crime.⁶ The survey also looked at which sources were used by non-participants who indicated a preference for anti-immigrant aggression. Non-participants with such intentions were more likely to select mass media sources (such as television) than were other groups. Despite concerns about the role of new media in promoting prejudice, these results demonstrate the continued importance of more traditional mass media platforms.

6. Those who used their own experiences were found to be much more likely to have friends and acquaintances who were foreign nationals. This finding builds on existing studies which suggest that contact with foreign nationals reduces anti-immigrant attitudes in South Africa (for a review of this research, see Gordon 2018).

Recommendations

Changing public attitudes is neither a simple nor a straightforward process. However, countless examples throughout history have shown that it is possible to change the hearts and minds of a population. With this opportunistic approach in mind, the following are proposed to help reduce anti-immigrant hate crime:

- *Systematically track peaceful anti-immigrant activities.* This will require better types of monitoring by the police and greater attention to conflict resolution at the community level. The authorities could be assisted by activist organisations (such as Lawyers for Human Rights and the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa) currently working on non-violent anti-immigrant activities. If adequate resources are mobilised to prevent such activities, the authorities can mitigate future outbreaks of anti-immigrant violence.
- *Educate the general public about the causes of anti-immigrant hate crime.* This will improve public engagement with the NAP and reduce victim-blaming, which can contribute to a climate in which xenophobic hate crime is seen as acceptable. Here communication strategists should look at successful examples of anti-hate campaigns in other African contexts.⁷
- *Use targeted media campaigns to expand public goodwill towards international migrants.* Given limited resources, government communication efforts should target media platforms that act as prime sources of information

7. Consider, for example, the media-based public education campaign run by *Radio La Benevolencija* in Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In response to the interethnic civil conflicts of the region, the campaign succeeded in promoting peace and reconciliation as well as fostering greater intergroup cooperation (Staub 2014).

on immigration. Greater targeting of radio and television broadcast programmes (such as those hosted by eTV and SABC News) is needed.

- *Regularly monitor citizens' attitudes and behaviours.* Tracking anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviours over time is necessary to evaluate and enhance the impact and effectiveness of intervention programmes. Here the authorities need to work with interested civil society organisations (such as Xenowatch and the Safety and Violence Initiative).
- *Implement well-resourced immigrant integration programmes.* There are policy interventions that can help immigrants to establish productive contact with citizens and better integrate them into existing community fabrics. The lack of well-resourced immigrant intervention programmes is recognised as a problem in the recent White Paper on International Migration.

The development and implementation of any meaningful anti-xenophobia strategy in South Africa must be part of a coherent and progressive approach to migration management. However, policy on this issue has suffered from incoherence and fragmentation. Indeed, the White Paper on International Migration acknowledges this reality. One of the chief reasons for this incoherence is a central paradox that characterised past policy stances: viewing immigration as economically positive and desirable while emphasising the need for restricting migrant inflows and expanding restrictive border controls. Unfortunately, this paradox is evident in the White Paper on International Migration as well as the White Paper on Home Affairs, which together seek to form the basis for a new policy stance on migration management in the country. The Ramaphosa Administration has committed itself to building greater coherence in government

policy. This commitment presents new opportunities to remove paradoxes in immigration policy.

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