

Migration rules must reflect globalised era

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SA's immigration policies have not kept pace with change as the country has emerged from isolation to play a leading role in the globalisation of Africa.

This has major consequences for internal economic and social development and for the country's integration into the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

Regional integration is becoming increasingly important in the context of globalisation, especially for smaller, developing economies such as SA's.

Inaccurate data on the number of immigrants in SA also adds to the problem.

Coping with immigration in a rapidly globalising environment is a policy issue facing many governments. A recent study of migration in southern Africa points out that "immigration policy is one of the last bastions of sovereign state power in an increasingly globalised world. Capital and information flow more or less freely across state borders. It is only when actual human bodies become involved that national drawbridges are raised."

SA has been widely criticised for its slow response to increasing migration across its borders and the important human rights and development issues this poses.

While immigration is generally seen as benefiting the nation's economy, there are widespread negative views on the issue.

Fear of competition for scarce jobs and highly publicised reports of criminal activity by immigrants — although this involves only a very small minority — fuel these views.

Government faces the dilemma of meeting growing demands for a more flexible and humane immigration policy while dealing with this widespread hostility to foreigners.

The response in the 1999 white paper on international migration has been to seek a balance between liberalisation and regulation by allowing people who add value to stay and keeping out those who do not.

Government has also recognised the need to address these concerns in

the context of SA's wider interests. The state of SA's population report 2000 notes that the "national interest ... needs to be debated in the context of both globalisation and the wider regional interest".

These interests call for an urgent revisiting of immigration policy. Globalisation is driving the formation of regional blocs to enhance, or merely retain, competitiveness.

Regional integration is not about one-sided political charity but about collective economic survival.

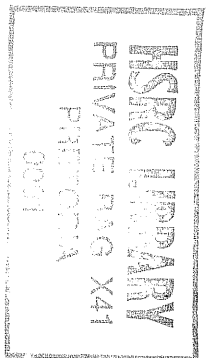
Migrants, including those from neighbouring countries, are mostly young adults and often represent the better-educated members of the sending country's population. Their effect extends beyond their numbers.

Cross-border migrants, many of whom do not wish to stay permanently, are likely to make constructive contributions to the regional economy by increasing financial exchanges and trade in consumer goods. From an SA and regional view, cross-border migration is an opportunity, not a threat.

Migration policy in southern Africa is the focus of a workshop, hosted jointly by the Southern African Regional Poverty Network, the Southern African Migration Project and Lawyers for Human Rights, to be held at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Pretoria, on April 25.

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2195