

Drivers of community xenophobic attacks in South Africa: poverty and unemployment

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Abstract

This paper argues that attacks of foreign nationals in most local communities were sparked by desperation precipitated by high rates of poverty and unemployment in South Africa. Additionally, there is citizens' frustrations with the perceived competition for access to the available resources, especially among poor people who are unemployed with no formal business support from government. In South Africa's twenty years of democracy, poverty and unemployment still remain critical concerns particularly among the poor in most townships and rural communities. Despite the country's initiative to identify policies and strategies that could be adopted to address the status quo, the majority has continued to live in abject poverty and demeaning unemployment. Lack of economic opportunities in South Africa continues to create hatred between foreign nationals and locals, sparking xenophobic attacks. South African citizens accused foreigners of stealing their jobs and other opportunities. The article recommends that South Africa should create a harmonious business environment for both locals and foreign nationals running businesses.

Keywords: xenophobic attacks, foreign nationals, local business, poverty, unemployment, South Africa

Introduction

Notwithstanding the country-wide fatal xenophobic attacks in 2008 and 2015 in South Africa, the underlying causes remains unclear. However, competition for scarce resources and business contestation appear to run supreme. The discourse, both in politics and in academia, about the causes of the conflict has continued unabated as unfinished stories. For this reason, South Africa is blamed for not making progress in combating xenophobic attacks following the 2008 incidences (Loots, 2013). It is also not clear as to what extent have South Africa done to transform its society in its two decades of democracy because persistent poverty and unemployment cannot be excluded from the driving forces for xenophobic attacks (Sosibo, 2015: 2). However, Wilkinson (2015: 1) argued that most foreign nationals own formal and informal business in South Africa. Other authors are of the opinion that the South African perceptions that foreigners are job takers and threat to the country's scarce resource, is a myth (Fuller, 2008; Kalitany & Visser, 2010; Maistry, 2015; Harrison, 2015) which is yet to be tested. However Minister Pravin Gordhan asserts that the popular myth of foreigners stealing South African jobs can be curbed through partnership-based interventions by government and business. Such interventions could include government support to improve local business through small medium enterprises. In recent years, though, government embarked on campaigns with slogans in most local communities and townships, calling on South Africans

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to stop the attacks in order to calm the situation rather than to introduce durable strategies to reduce tensions. Government campaign through print, audio and visual media too made a negligible impact on the xenophobic status quo.

Poverty and lack of access to resources can only affect the powerless and desperate (Neocosmos, 2008). The people that are suffering from poverty and unemployment are likely to be confused and desperate to the extent of developing hatred against successful foreign nationals. Perceptions and sentiments such as these have seemed to perpetrate tension that unfolded into violent abuses across South Africa.

Xenophobia in the South African Context

Xenophobia within the contemporary South Africa has received media and political attention, which degenerated into a blame-game against South Africans devoid of rational argument. Like any other country in the world, South Africa's xenophobia branding is not an enjoyable experience, but it is not an isolated case. However, xenophobia in other countries is not as popular and brutal like in South Africa. But it does not compare with anti-Semitism in Germany. According to Duponchel (2013), xenophobia in South Africa cannot be clearly understood without a review of the global apartheid context which continues to characterise the life of most South Africans. The origins of xenophobia in South Africa is older than the outbreaks of 2008, traceable to the immediate post-1994 period. The concept of xenophobia means a dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries (Lerner, Roberts & Matlala, 2009). For South Africa, the concept is necessarily linked to racism and acts of brutal violence against foreign nationals by frustrated South Africans (Harris, 2002; Mbembe, 2015; Rabkin, 2015). The latter continue to receive poor and inadequate service delivery in the contexts of claims that they have to share the limited resource with foreign nationals. Linking the acts of xenophobia to colour of the victims in South Africa has agitated the suggestion that it is actually *Afrophobia*. At its height, xenophobic attacks in South Africa have appeared to exclusively involve African immigrants.

African immigrants from countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Somalia and Egypt have been on the receiving end of the xenophobic attacks, which is also consistent with their characterisation as the most successful small and micro-business entrepreneurs operating in cities, townships and other localities. These sentiments have held notwithstanding the apparent successes of the formal and informal business owned by foreign nationals of other countries other than Africa. Hence, xenophobia in the South African context has become synonymous with violent abuses and attacks against African immigrants (Olukoju, 2008; Oloyede, 2008; Lerner, Roberts & Matlala, 2009; Francis & Nyamnjoh, 2010). Indeed, African immigrants in South Africa are labelled by derogatory names such as "*Makwerekwere*", "*makhalangas*" or "*magrigambas*", while in other parts of the country they are characterised as "*Mekgaritswana*", "*Makula*", "*Mapafo*" and "*Makgaretein*". According to Buthelezi (2009: 14), all these names are offensive against foreign nationals, largely those from Africa.

Offensive names such as *Mekgaritswana*, *Mapafo* and *Makgaretein* are inked to the business foreign nationals' operations in most local communities. Their business operations normally involve door-to-door selling of goods such as curtains, comforters and some zinc materials. Apparently, these names also signify hatred of African foreign nationals (Solomon & Kosaka, 2014). Most attacks appear to be linked to frustration over government failure to deliver post-

apartheid South Africa's promise of a better life for all (Bobb, 2008; Ilesanmi, 2008; Nell, 2008; Olowu, 2008; Rabkin, 2015). Xenophobia in South Africa is generally characterised as hatred and racist attitudes against African foreign nationals (Solomon & Kosaka, 2014). Hence, Harrison (2015) asks whether or not recent xenophobic attacks are characteristic of "*swart gevaar*". South Africa has a history of political violence which was always associated with blacks; and, xenophobic abuses too are taking the same shape and character.

Poverty, unemployment and xenophobia in South Africa

Given the high rates of poverty and unemployment in South Africa, it should be tenable to examine the causality of these factors with xenophobic attitudes and violence. Despite lack of a comparable data, poverty and unemployment is perceived to have significantly increased after the country's democratic dispensation in 1994. In 2010, poverty was reported to have increased by 57.2%, subsequently declining in 2011 by 45.5% (Statistics South Africa, 2014). Poor people are blamed for orchestrating all acts of xenophobic attacks. However, Neocosmos (2008) asserts that poverty does not justify violence, pointing to the absence of a rational argument in the xenophobic attacks that gripped South Africa in recent years. Whereas poor South Africans are said to be fighting for the economic space, their acts of violence ironically perpetrate economic stagnation and deterioration. There is a connection between unemployment among the youth and adult the rate of immigrants in South Africa.

Statistics from Tradingeconomics.com (2015) that unemployment in South Africa has increased from 24.30% in the fourth quarter of 2014 to 26.40% in the first quarter of 2015. Unemployment rate in South Africa averaged 25.27% over the period 2000-2015, reaching high of 31.20% in the first quarter of 2003 and a low of 21.50% in the fourth quarter of 2008 (Tradingeconomics.com, 2015). Wilkinson (2015: 1) reveals in a study titled "*Are foreigners stealing jobs in South Africa*" that 26.16% of "non-migrants" are unemployed while the same measure is 32.51% for "domestic migrants". By comparison, only 14.68% of international migrants are unemployed" (Wilkinson, 2015). Furthermore, Wilkinson (2015: 1) also show that 32.65% of international migrants are employed in the informal sector in South Africa compared to 16.57% of "non-migrants" and 17.97% of "domestic migrants". These statistical patterns reveal that there may be a connection between being foreign national and performing well in informal business sector, with the result that locals may feel aggrieved that they have not been equally or more successful.

Despite the fact that poverty does not justify violence, poor people tends to vent their frustrations through violence. According to Nicolson (2015: 1), almost 12 million South African citizens live in poverty. However Statistics South Africa (2014: 12) reported that the number of people living in poverty in South Africa increased from 12.6 million in 2006 to 15.8 million in 2009, dropping to 10.2 million in 2011.

It is virtually impossible to objectively establish a causal link between poverty, unemployment and xenophobic attacks, notwithstanding their apparent association. This observation was highlighted by Fuller (2008), Mwhiti (2015) and Neocosmos (2015). However, the reality of xenophobic violence in most townships and local communities appears to be fuelled by poverty and unemployment. In-depth studies are required to closely investigate the causes of the ongoing xenophobic attacks.

“Truth” and reflections on xenophobia in South Africa, 2008-2015

While violent attacks against foreign nationals is critical, it should also be noted that there is meaning behind these acts. There have been campaigns pleading with South Africans to stop the attacks. But government too has failed to mitigate xenophobic potential and threats. The South African History Online (SAHO, 2015) outlined some pre-2008 cases which government seems to have ignored. Hereunder are some cases that occurred as early as 2000 and were reported in the media.

- In 2000 there were cases of xenophobic killings of foreign nationals from Nigeria and Kenya, which were reported in Cape Town (SAHO, 2015). It is not known as to whether those who were held responsible for the killings and hijacking were arrested. Failure of government to act on such cases may encourage to future attacks.
- In 2008 violent xenophobic attacks occurred in Alexandra and Diepsloot townships in Gauteng Province and later spread to other provinces such as Free State, Mpumalanga and North-West. In those attacks, almost all businesses owned by Somalians, Pakistanis and Ethiopians were looted before being burned, while houses which were suspected to be owned by foreign nationals were also burned by angry South Africans. After the outburst campaigns were launched wherein ministers preached slogans that we are all Africans. The truth about the 2008 attacks is that South Africa failed to review policies on migration, hence the situation worsened.
- The year 2013 also marked one of the horrific incident wherein a Mozambican man was brutally killed by South African Police officers, agitating for perceptions that government too contributed to violent xenophobic attacks.
- Currently, 2015 marks a year of violent xenophobic attacks, which were allegedly associated with a speech by the Zulu King.

With all the reflections on violent xenophobic attacks in South Africa, it is not known whether this could be the last attacks that the country will see or if there are still major attacks to come. Not until the government do something to address poverty and unemployment, South Africa might still face major disastrous attacks which would undermine the notion of a rainbow nation (Jaynes, 2008: 12). The other resentment against foreigners in South Africa is over the foreign business owners who are operating local business without employing the local people (Wikipedia.Org, 2015). Most of the outbreaks in Gauteng, and Pretoria in particular, are said to be driven by attractions of the major cities. South Africans migrate to Johannesburg for greener pastures, where they find it difficult to compete with foreign nationals for scarce resources.

Fuller (2008: 10) suggested that government should deal with the perpetrators of xenophobic violence by ensuring that critical witnesses are available to testify. Despite the availability of such witnesses, many cases of xenophobic attacks occurred but some of the responsible individuals were not held accountable for engaging in such brutal attacks. The sentiments of all these attacks suggest that political leadership is also at fault. Siko (2015) asserts that it is unsurprising that the associations of poverty, unemployment and xenophobia came at a time when South Africans struggled for economic freedom. Neocosmos (2008: 1) argued that “xenophobia is a political discourse and also a set of ideological parameters within which solutions to the pressing problems are being conceived”.

Looting, anger and frustrations: Manifestations of poverty and unemployment

Fuller (2008) argue that South African citizens use immigrants as scapegoats for government failure to address domestic problems such as crime, unemployment, poverty and resources limitations. It is not known if poverty and unemployment are not the driving forces behind xenophobia in South Africa. Since 2008, outburst of xenophobic attacks occurred mostly townships rather than in urban suburbs. How best can the South African government justify both the previous and the recent attacks without giving it an angle of poverty and unemployment? The answer lies in the struggling economic problems in which the poor South Africans find themselves. Therefore, if the notion that poverty and unemployment among citizens are not behind the attacks, then what are the cause? According to Hadland (2008: 8), South African citizens are frustrated over insufficient pace of service delivery and contestations over housing provisions in local communities. Bobb (2008: 1) asserts that poverty is to blame for the 2008 attacks and failure of government to deliver social services to its citizens. Hence, this article argues that South Africa does not experience xenophobic violence in well-off urban areas than in townships, because most foreigners resettle therein. While South Africans seek for better job opportunities, foreigners may settle for lesser working conditions.

It is clear that when the South African citizens expectations are being betrayed by the government's failure to deliver what has been promised, they respond with anger. Activities such as looting and burning of businesses owned by Somalians, Pakistanis and Ethiopians occurred in Gauteng, Kwazulu-Natal and other parts of the country. Siko (2015: 2) emphasised that looting is an indication of constant poverty which community members are experiencing on daily basis. Le Riche (2015: 1) argued that looting of foreign business also involves people who are not yet ready to make it in the market world. Despite Le Riche's (2015) view, note should be taken that acts of violence do not only involve burning down foreign businesses, but that they also loot the business stock. Public media has shown local people looting from foreign owned shops. Siko (2015: 2) argued that most of the townships where the attacks are taking place experience high rates of unemployment and poverty. But care should be exercised in that xenophobic violence and looting can be traced back to 1994 after the country's first democratic elections (Duponchel, 2013: 6), questioning the logic of the argument of an increasingly frustrated majority that is venting anger against foreign national.

Perceived business competition: Foreign entrepreneurs versus and locals

South Africa's economic wealth also shows that the attack behind foreigners also cripples the country's economic growth (Chen, 2015: 1; Le Cordeur, 2015: 1). The recent attacks caught that much attention to an extent that even some of South Africa's businesses in other countries were threatened. The *Mail & Guardian* on 20 April 2015 reported that most of South African businesses that are operating in African countries also felt the heat of the threats of violent attacks. Foreign nationals' businesses appear to have presented threats to locals' businesses with their competitive market prices. The attacks also contributed negatively to local business with the intention to expand into African countries (Chen, 2015: 1). However, Mwititi (2015: 1) argued that the immigrants do not necessarily threaten South African business. The argument is that it is only the local businesses that have been closed down due to the mushrooming of foreign business in most townships. Most of foreign nationals' businesses are reliable and viable. Bearing in mind that the South African citizens

operate their business with tax implications, it becomes difficult to compete with foreign business that hardly pay tax dues to the South African government.

Recommendations: Measures for curbing xenophobic attacks

The South African government did not do enough to curb the attacks and to address the causes behind them. How the xenophobic attacks relate to racism, frustrations or lack of political leadership in the country remains unknown. Therefore the article recommends that: *Firstly*, the manner in which the country deals with immigrants who are in the country for business or economic reasons must be reviewed because most foreign nationals who are in the country for business or economic reasons threatens the local business. *Secondly*, government must not only combat xenophobia in the South African context, but also look deeper into the attitudes of nationals from other countries such as Zimbabwe and Nigeria. *Thirdly*, government should check how other countries deal with xenophobia or migrants in their country. Despite the statement made by Chen (2015: 1) that South Africa is a home to nationals from almost 53 foreign countries which gives the country a wider range of ethnic variety than other countries, the *fourth* recommendation drawn in this article is that even though the country failed to identify foreigners who are in the country legally, government should examine statistics of illegal immigrants and resolve it. *Lastly*, further research should be conducted to investigate the causes of xenophobia in townships.

Conclusion

The wave of xenophobia in South Africa brought so many questions, perceptions and arguments as to what are the major causes of the violent attacks. It has been argued in this article that the country should focus more on improving and providing more poverty alleviation programmes to fight the increasing rate of poverty and unemployment. This paper acknowledges that happy mind goes with a full stomach and it is along those lines wherein the South African citizens will see those foreigner nationals as their brothers and sisters. But if they are told that they should unite with foreigners on an empty stomach they are likely to respond with anger, frustration and violence towards their fellow African brothers. Hence, this article argues that South Africa should look deeper into poverty and unemployment in the hope of curbing outbreaks of xenophobia. In the long term, poverty eradication and peace keeping in South Africa will create the best lasting solution.

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