

Provocation Piece | June 2025

Rethinking Migration in South Africa: Beyond Borders, Beyond Blame

"If you don't plan for someone in your space, and a crisis like COVID-19 happens, it doesn't only affect the planned-for, it affects everyone. That's the essence of why migration planning matters."



Dr. Nompumelelo Nzimande-Mbele

South Africa stands at a critical juncture in its approach to migration governance. Insights presented during the **Migration Insights Exchange held on 3 June 2025** highlight the necessity of a paradigm shift: migration is not merely about international border crossings—it encompasses internal, inter-provincial, and intra-city movements that shape the country's demographic, economic, and spatial realities. The degree to which the state anticipates and includes migrants in planning directly affects not only service delivery but also the cohesion and functionality of communities.

At present, discourse around migration remains narrow and fragmented. Speakers at the webinar emphasized that South Africa's

national narrative often privileges international migration over internal migration, neglecting the substantial and steady movement of people between provinces—such as from Limpopo to Gauteng or from the Eastern Cape to the Western Cape. This oversight, as one speaker noted, results in planning failures that are felt most acutely in the provision of public services:

"The competition we see for social services stems in part from the unbalanced manner we view population... we will continue to ignore it unless we plan and incorporate everyone who uses the services, not just citizens."



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This misalignment is particularly visible at the local government level. Research findings shared during the webinar revealed that many municipalities still regard migration as exclusively a matter for the Department of Home Affairs. This perception absolves them of responsibility and results in governance structures that are siloed and reactive, rather than proactive and integrated. However, it is municipalities that bear the greatest responsibility for responding to the needs of both internal and international migrants, especially in the domains of housing, healthcare, education, and infrastructure.

"It is not entirely accurate that we don't have data on irregular migrants. As a statistics office, during a survey or census, we don't know who is behind the door – a South African citizen, a documented migrant or an undocumented migrant."



Diego Iturralde, StatsSA

While underutilized, migration data exists and is being actively collected. Entities such as the South African Population Research Infrastructure Network (SAPRIN), Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), and various global data platforms including the United Nations Population Division and UNHCR, are collecting and making accessible migration-related datasets. The challenge lies not in availability but in interpretation, application, and coordination. As a presenter posed:

"Is migration data really not accessible — or do we just not know how to use it?"

Demographic trends suggest a significant increase in international migration since South Africa's democratic transition, with the majority of migrants coming from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region—particularly Zimbabwe. Most of these migrants are working-age males, primarily settling in urban hubs such as Gauteng and the Western Cape, drawn by employment opportunities, infrastructure, and proximity to major entry ports. Migrants are often blamed for systemic

failures—becoming scapegoats for political and economic grievances. This scapegoating not only distorts the public discourse but obscures the root causes of service delivery failures, which are more often linked to governance deficits than migration pressures.

One of the more nuanced discussions in the webinar revolved around xenophobia, and whether this term adequately captures the socio-political realities in South Africa. As one participant provocatively suggested:

"The blanket use of xenophobia paints black communities as just mad and violent while negating real issues that lead to these clashes."

Rather than reducing community tensions to "inexplicable hate," participants called for deeper engagement with the socio-economic stressors—including unemployment, service backlogs, and competition for scarce resources—that often underlie anti-immigrant sentiments. In the same breath, it was argued that we are seeing this international trend of increased political aggression against migrants, including in South Africa and we must take it into consideration.

At the core of effective migration governance is the need for a clear and inclusive definition of migration. One participant raised concerns about whether traditional definitions—such as those used in census data, which often exclude short-term or undocumented migrants—adequately reflect the complex realities of human mobility. For example, individuals who overstay their initial reasons for movement or whose legal status changes during their stay are frequently left out of formal data systems.

However, the presenter clarified that this perceived data gap may be overstated. According to the speaker, such groups can still be captured through broader classifications, such as 'foreign-born'—a category used by StatsSA. This approach allows for the inclusion of both long-term migrants and those with more temporary or transitional statuses. As a result, data users can distinguish between 'usual residents' (long-term migrants) and short-term or seasonal migrants

who do not intend to settle permanently, enabling more nuanced planning and policy development.

Moreover, the language used in migration discourse was rightly problematized. The term “illegal immigrant” was critiqued as dehumanizing and misleading. As one speaker argued,

“There is no such thing as an illegal person.”

Such terminology not only fuels xenophobia but perpetuates a narrative of criminality and threat, undermining efforts to integrate migrants into the socio-economic fabric of the country.

To address these issues, South Africa must draw upon frameworks such as the 2018 White Paper on International Migration, which envisions a more integrated, rights-based approach to migration management. The White Paper emphasizes South Africa’s commitment to become a place of inclusion and regional cooperation, articulating responsibilities across various levels of government and civil society. However, implementation remains uneven. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the importance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations (FBOs), and community-based organizations (CBOs) in reaching undocumented or vulnerable migrant populations—particularly where trust in government is low.

One of the most compelling provocations posed during the webinar was:

Why are South Africans comfortable seeking economic opportunity abroad, yet resistant to welcoming others who do the same here?

This question forces reflection on national attitudes, revealing possible contradictions rooted in fear, lack of awareness, or entrenched inequality. To build a more inclusive and effective migration governance system, South Africa must urgently:

- 1 Clarify migration definitions and promote inclusive, disaggregated data practices.
- 2 Build capacity at municipal levels to become active stakeholders in migration governance.
- 3 Invest in public education campaigns to counter misinformation and politicised narratives.
- 4 At all three levels of government, explore the use of existing administrative datasets and the missed opportunities of existing data collection efforts (e.g. missing variables in healthcare databases), towards more granular migration insights.
- 5 Foster interdepartmental and cross-sectoral collaboration to create a robust “migration data ecosystem.”
- 6 Adopt a differentiated service delivery model that recognizes and plans for both migrants and citizens.

Migration is not a crisis. It is a persistent and natural feature of human society. The real crisis lies in the state’s response—or lack thereof. If South Africa is to realize the promises of its democratic ideals, it must move beyond fear-based narratives and begin planning inclusively for everyone who lives within its borders. Only then can we build a society that is just, resilient, and truly reflective of its diverse realities.

NEXT MONTH

SAVE THE DATE

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 Tuesday 1 July 2025

 14:00–16:00



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