

NEVA MAKGETLA: Paradigm shift needed on immigration policy

The effect of immigration depends largely on the migrants' skills

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A foreign woman changes her child's diapers in a camp on a sports field in Chatsworth, south of Durban, in this April 15, 2015 file photo. Picture: REUTERS/ROGAN WARD

Political parties have struggled to respond to xenophobia. Most recently the ANC manifesto starts by reiterating its dedication to keeping SA free from xenophobia and quotes the president calling for South Africans to be “comfortable with immigrants from other countries”. Then, however, it paints undocumented immigrants as criminals and security risks, and specific proposals incorporate the slur that foreign traders adulterate food.

This is not much of an advance on the antimigrant rhetoric spewed by the DA and other political parties. A more constructive approach would start by analysing the evidence on migration: its scale, what drives it and how it affects SA.

The UN estimates that the number of foreigners in SA climbed from under 1.5-million in 2005 to 4-million in 2017. They now constitute about 7% of residents, up from 2% a decade ago. Most come from Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Lesotho.

About half of all immigrants settle in Gauteng. According to the 2011 census, foreign-born residents made up 7.1% of the population in Gauteng, compared to 1.5% in the rest of the country. That's not surprising, since Gauteng is also a magnet for internal migration. Gauteng's population climbed by close to 60% from 1996 to 2016 — almost three times as fast as the rest of SA.

The effect of immigration depends largely on the migrants' skills. As the national development plan (NDP) points out, skilled migration both boosts overall production and job creation, and promotes more equal pay. That's particularly important in SA, where apartheid limits on education and training led to deeply unequal remuneration by international standards.

Currently, SA is losing more graduates than it allows in. From 1994 to 2016 almost 3-million people graduated from SA's universities and technikons. In 2016, however, the community survey found just 2.1-million university graduates aged under 45. The difference presumably reflected net emigration.

These realities mean continually tightening restrictions on skilled immigrants is counterproductive. Worse, the regulations aim to maintain, rather than alleviate, the inequalities entrenched under apartheid. They specifically bar immigrants who would accept lower pay than existing professionals except in the case of "scarce skills".

Professional bodies determine the local pay level — and they naturally want to avoid competing their pay down from the inflated rates entrenched by apartheid skills restrictions.

It's harder to manage migration by lower skilled people, who compete with citizens for jobs and, in the case of shop owners, for customers. Some economists argue that competition promotes growth, but it also aggravates income inequalities and undermines social cohesion. The challenges are sharpest in Gauteng, where foreign-born migrants often join new SA arrivals in impoverished settlements without sufficient housing or economic opportunities.

The downward pressure on pay is particularly sharp for undocumented migrants because, as with the pass laws under apartheid, the threat of deportation means many don't dare complain or organise. That is why the labour movement historically called for equal protection for foreign-born workers.

International experience shows that simply cracking down on mass immigration won't work where there are big economic incentives to move. The gap in incomes between SA and most of its neighbours provides that incentive. The ratio between the GDP per person of the other Brics nations to their neighbours is under four; for SA, the ratio is five.

If we can't simply block immigrants, we need a paradigm shift in immigration policy. An effective approach would centre on improving conditions and creating opportunities for all immigrants to urban areas, whether from SA or from neighbouring countries. That would in turn require more realistic projections for population growth in Gauteng. SA would also have to scale up support for regional development, especially in historic labour-sending regions in neighbouring countries.

This kind of constructive and developmental approach does not provide easy answers or play into voters' prejudices. But it is the only realistic way to manage the negative effects of mass immigration.

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