

The Fault Lines of Urban Poverty and Inequality Create an Explosive Mix for Xenophobia

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The growth in immigrants from the rest of Africa to South Africa, and attacks on such immigrants, dates to the mid-1990s.

What has changed today is that South Africa is home or temporary host to exponentially more immigrants. What is different today is that immigrants are infinitely more intertwined in the lives of ordinary South Africans.

South Africans are generating profits in other African countries. There is a roaring export trade to those countries. Today also, many middle class South Africans encounter immigrants daily, including those working in their homes and in the hospitality sector.

Immigrants even have more established networks and support systems today. Many have carved out areas or precincts in cities for a community life that includes various services; products from home and places where language needs are met. Immigrants are no longer a homogenous group. Despite the persistence of poor and illegal immigrants, many are legal and large numbers have become citizens. Some hail from conflict zones and are asylum seekers (and therefore have protection under international law). Some are businesspeople, bringing their own money; others are students who pay a premium to our universities. Certain immigrants have even become top commentators on South African politics or an integral part of the local academic world.

Many attitudes to immigrants deny this diversity and are based on a crude perception of immigrants and what they mean in our lives. The informal settlements provide a specific context for the current conflict. Informal settlements are growing in number and size, despite the RDP housing programme and the Breaking New Ground initiatives.

These settlements represent individual/household initiative and a level of community based service-provision. However, in the worst cases, they can also be places that are marked by insecurity, lack of basic services, poor environmental conditions and an absence of facilities for community life.

Thus the problem of negative attitudes to immigrants from other African countries is interwoven with a grassroots response to the hardships of poverty and unmet expectations in informal settlements. Through the current conflict, informal settlements are pushing themselves onto the consciousness of the broader South African public. They are calling out for a response that is faster and more dynamic than the apparently unrelenting growth of informal settlements.

If the informal settlement is the mixing bowl, a range of factors and issues are the ingredients for the explosive mix.

The conflict is one between "poor and poor". It is an example of the poor turning their frustration and anger in response to their impoverished conditions inward. Feeling marginalized and hopeless, the poor sometimes reach breaking point and lash out; and in doing so hit at the target that is

closest and easiest to attack. One can only estimate how the economic shocks in the form of steep food and fuel price increases, and knock-on effects, plays a role in driving members of poor households into crisis and towards desperation point.

There are also identity issues at stake. While it is true that Nelson Mandela's South Africa has been an example of tolerance, 'tribal' or identity-based mobilization has been part of the life in South Africa for a long time. Consequently there have been conflicts on the mines, in kwaZulu Natal and between hostel dwellers and residents in townships of the former Transvaal. In many cases, the precise reasons for such clashes remained a puzzle, remaining tied up in rumour, fear mongering and in recent times, in the workings of a third force. The evidence suggests, however, that even where ethnic differences exist, communities don't simply wake up on a particular day to attack their neighbours; in most cases, members of the local elite or self-styled leaders usually play a role in whipping up emotions and instigating attacks.

There is a clash of outlook and expectations at play in the cheek-by-jowl environment of the shack lands. While black South African have aspirations (they want a better life and jobs now), the poorest immigrants seem happy to be bottom feeders, and less resistant to picking up crumbs from the economic table. One gets the impression that locals involved in the conflict expected solidarity from immigrants with regard to fighting and holding out for certain kinds of jobs that pay a certain level of wages.

There are signs of different approaches to entrepreneurship opportunities between locals and their new neighbours. For example, there are reports of instances where local hawkers leave their spots at transport terminuses to get home at the end of the day while the immigrant trader stays on until the last taxi or bus has left. While further investigation is needed to verify this (and to probe the reasons), many researchers argue that immigrant hawkers are better entrepreneurs. This has caused jealousy, which has fuelled anti-immigrant animosity on the ground.

No one knows what the real trigger was for the wave of mob attacks on immigrants. Why it began when it did, and why in Alexandra Township? Is a hidden hand responsible for providing the spark and for co-ordinating the spread? Who knows? Clearly xenophobia is a key ingredient and the immediate rallying point for the mobs perpetrating the violence.

But we must take note of the range of other tensions and conflicts that have been gaining force under the surface of polite public debates. Policymakers and other role-players must urgently tackle xenophobia as well as the frightening fault lines of urban poverty and inequality.

P.S.

* From Amandla!:

<http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/content/view/722/154/>