

CONSTRUCTING THE MIGRANT THREAT: ZIMBABWEAN MIGRATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

Sibonakalisiwe Zodwa Khabo¹, Arfin Sudirman¹, and Anggia Utami Dewi¹

¹Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Jatinangor, Sumedang 45363, West Java, Indonesia

E-mail: sibonakalisiwe24001@mail.unpad.ac.id; arfin.sudirman@unpad.ac.id; anggia.utami@unpad.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The presence of Zimbabwean migrants in South African communities has led to a rise in public debates and emotive sentiments over the years. Although Zimbabwean migration is not a new phenomenon in the region, public debates and community sentiments often suggest that it has increased anxiety about belonging, access to services, and social coexistence. These frustrations have contributed significantly to tensions and conflicts between Zimbabwean migrants and South African citizens, particularly in low-income urban communities. As a result, Zimbabwean migration is increasingly viewed not through a humanitarian lens, but as a threat to employment opportunities, access to resources, and social cohesion among local populations. Using the social constructivist framework, the study argues that social tensions are not shaped entirely by economic or social circumstances but are a result of socially constructed perceptions of threat and outsider status. The study employs qualitative content analysis of media reports, civil society records, and existing scholarly works to establish prevalent narratives that portray Zimbabwean migrants as exacerbating unemployment, criminal activity, and the strain on public resources. The findings and results indicate that local conflicts often arise when migrants are labelled as the cause of wider socio-economic dissatisfaction. By focusing on local social dynamics, the article contributes to migration studies in International Relations by highlighting how local social dynamics shape the reception of migrants.

Keywords: Zimbabwean migration; social constructivism; community-level tensions; migration perceptions; South Africa

MEMBANGUN ANCAMAN MIGRAN: MIGRASI ZIMBABWE DI KOMUNITAS AFRIKA SELATAN

ABSTRAK

Kehadiran migran Zimbabwe di komunitas Afrika Selatan telah menyebabkan peningkatan perdebatan publik dan sentimen emosional selama bertahun-tahun. Meskipun migrasi Zimbabwe bukanlah fenomena baru di kawasan ini, perdebatan publik dan sentimen masyarakat sering kali mencerminkan bahwa hal itu telah menyebabkan peningkatan kecemasan tentang rasa memiliki, akses ke layanan, dan koeksistensi sosial. Ketidakpuasan ini telah menjadi penyebab utama konflik antara migran dan penduduk lokal Afrika Selatan di komunitas. Migrasi Zimbabwe tidak lagi dipandang dari sudut pandang kemanusiaan, melainkan sebagai ancaman terhadap keamanan pekerjaan penduduk lokal serta kohesi sosial. Dengan menggunakan kerangka kerja konstruktivis sosial, penelitian ini berpendapat bahwa ketegangan sosial tidak sepenuhnya dibentuk oleh keadaan ekonomi atau sosial, tetapi merupakan hasil dari persepsi ancaman dan status orang luar yang dibangun secara sosial. Penelitian ini menggunakan analisis konten kualitatif dari laporan media, catatan masyarakat sipil, dan karya ilmiah yang ada untuk menetapkan narasi yang umum yang menggambarkan migran Zimbabwe sebagai penyebab meningkatnya pengangguran, aktivitas kriminal, dan beban pada sumber daya publik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa konflik lokal sering muncul ketika migran dicap sebagai penyebab ketidakpuasan sosial-ekonomi yang lebih luas. Dengan berfokus pada dinamika sosial lokal, artikel ini berkontribusi pada studi migrasi dalam Hubungan Internasional dengan menyoroti bagaimana dinamika sosial lokal membentuk penerimaan migran.

Kata kunci: Migrasi Zimbabwe; konstruktivisme sosial; ketegangan tingkat komunitas; persepsi migrasi; Afrika Selatan

INTRODUCTION

Migration between Zimbabwe and South Africa is not a new phenomenon; there is a long history between the two countries that is influenced by their geographical closeness, shared economic connections, and unequal development in Southern

Africa. Historically, South Africa's stronger economy and job market have attracted Zimbabwean migrants, a trend that started before the economic and political problems of the early 2000s (Crush et al., 2017). Migration between the two countries is part of a larger trend of labour movement in Southern Africa, with a long trend of people moving

across borders for better job opportunities and in order to provide support for their families. Over time, these movements developed into strong relationship networks across borders with the establishment of kinship and community ties, which led to migration being more manageable and less risky. These ties made mobility easier as they provided information, temporary accommodation, and initial access to labour markets. As a result, migration became a structured and socially embedded livelihood rather than a response to crisis (Chivige & Alfaró-Velcamp, 2023).

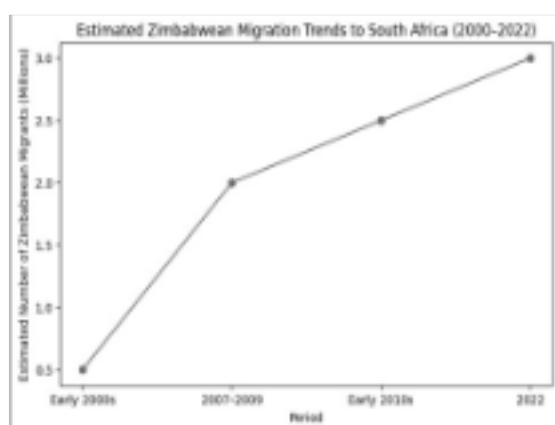


Figure 1: Estimated Zimbabwean Migration Trends to South Africa (2000–2022)

Source: Compiled by the author using data from Statistics South Africa (2022)

Figure 1 illustrates the significant increase in Zimbabwean migration to South Africa between the early 2000s and 2022. Although South Africa and Zimbabwe have historically shared strong migration ties, migration flows rose sharply during the early 2000s as Zimbabwe experienced severe economic decline, political instability, and rising unemployment. The figure shows that migration intensified particularly between 2007 and 2009, a period associated with Zimbabwe's economic crisis and hyperinflation. During this period, both skilled and unskilled Zimbabweans crossed into South Africa in search of employment opportunities, safety, and improved living conditions. As Moyo (2024) notes, worsening economic conditions and persistent unemployment intensified everyday insecurities, making migration to neighbouring South Africa a rational and often necessary survival strategy. In this context, migration became part of broader household coping mechanisms aimed at economic resilience and social survival.

Zimbabwean migrants have long formed part of South African history; however, their reception in local communities has always been a politically

and socially sensitive issue. In the early stages of increased migration, many South African communities responded well to Zimbabwean migrants with sympathy and understanding, recognising the economic and political hardships that had forced many to leave their country. However, over time, local communities began to lose all empathy; the prolonged presence of foreign nationals, as well as the increase in numbers, led to frustrations amongst residents, especially in areas characterised by unemployment, inequality, and pressure on public services (Crush et al., 2017).

Over time, this created an environment in which foreigners were viewed with suspicion and as competitors of locals over limited economic and social resources. South African communities stopped viewing Zimbabwean migrants as merely neighbours in need but as threats to their own means of survival. Demographic estimates place Zimbabwe as the leading source of migrants in South Africa, with over one million people believed to be resident in the country; this is an indication of the depth of migration linkages between the two countries (Statistics South Africa, 2025). As a result, scholars have noted that narratives framing migrants, especially Zimbabweans, as competitors for jobs and contributors to crime have become increasingly commonplace in media reporting and everyday discourse (Mbuyisa, 2021).

Attitudes toward migrants are greatly influenced by pre-existing material conditions in communities. In areas affected by unemployment, housing shortages and informal labour markets, competition over resources often becomes personalised at a local level (Chikohomero, 2023). Zimbabwean migrants are highly visible in informal retail, domestic work, construction, and small-scale entrepreneurship, as a result of socio-economic pressures in South African communities. Their participation in these sectors generates perceptions that they are undercutting wages or displacing South African workers, even where empirical evidence of systematic displacement remains inconclusive (Landau, 2011). This has led to a social narrative that frames migrants as direct competitors within already precarious communities, contributing to enmity and hostility within communities and leading to neighbourhood-level confrontations, informal evictions, exclusion of migrants from local trading spaces, and public protests demanding stricter immigration enforcement (Crush et al., 2017).

Moyo and Zanker (2020) argue that in communities' migration is no longer regarded through a humanitarian, developmental, or regional coopera-

tion lens but is increasingly framed as a threat to South Africa's national security, public order, and economic stability. Mbuyisa (2021), contends that this has given rise to narratives framing migrants, especially Zimbabweans, as competitors for jobs and contributors to crime in media reporting and everyday discourse. Such perceptions, Crush, et al. (2017) postulate, have been linked to recurrent episodes of xenophobic hostility, some of which disproportionately affect Zimbabweans given their numerical concentration and visibility in informal sectors. Therefore, migration in the region is frequently debated within broader discussions about unemployment, economic inequality, and access to public services (Akinrinde & Tar, 2021; Nicolai & Gellwitzki, 2025).

African political theorists also provide important insight into these dynamics. Murenje and Sibanda (2026) argue that xenophobia in South Africa reflects a broader crisis of citizenship, where national belonging is narrowly defined and often used to exclude non-nationals during periods of social and economic pressure. Rather than viewing xenophobic hostility as irrational, they placed it within political discourses that differentiate between "citizens" and "foreigners" in moral as well as legal terms. Similarly, Nyamnjoh (2017), emphasises the fluid and negotiated nature of African identities, arguing that belonging on the continent has historically been flexible and relational, yet it is increasingly framed in rigid, exclusionary ways in contemporary political contexts. These perspectives suggest that tensions around Zimbabwean migrants are linked to broader struggles over citizenship, nationhood, and post-apartheid identity.

Most scholarship has explored the social and political dynamics surrounding migration in South Africa. Murenje and Sibanda (2026) have examined issues such as migrant vulnerability and the recurring episodes of violence directed at foreign nationals in certain communities, whilst Muchemwa and Batisai (2024) explore how social networks and integration influence the residential choice of Zimbabwean migrants. Previous studies on migration have also focused on policy analysis. Moyo and Zanker (2020) trace the evolution of South African immigration policy, showing that even before the Zimbabwean crisis, migrants were often treated through a security lens. Amit et al. (2012) document the bureaucratic barriers migrants faced when trying to access refugee reception offices, reflecting an institutional culture of suspicion and exclusion, whilst Vorvornator and Enaifoghe (2024) explore the renewal and administrative challenges surrounding Zimbabwean special permits.

However, less attention has been paid to how migration-related tensions are socially constructed and reproduced at the community level through everyday public discourse, local narratives, and perceptions of belonging. Existing scholarship often focuses on national policy debates or large-scale xenophobic violence, while giving limited attention to how ordinary community interactions and public discussions shape perceptions of Zimbabwean migrants within local settings. At the community level, grievances are often a combination of insecurities about unemployment and service provision, and anxieties about national identity and belonging, which lead to broader structural frustrations by local communities being unleashed on migrants. In this article, "community-level grievances" refers primarily to frustrations within low-income urban communities, especially townships and informal settlements affected by unemployment and limited access to resources.

This study addresses that gap by examining how social tensions surrounding Zimbabwean migrants are constructed and articulated within South African communities. Rather than focusing primarily on migration policy or violent outbreaks, the study analyses how migrants become associated with crime, unemployment, pressure on public services, and outsider status through public narratives and community discourse. Using a social constructivist framework, the article demonstrates how migration-related tensions are shaped not only by material socio-economic conditions but also by socially constructed meanings, identities, and perceptions.

According to social constructivist scholars, social realities are not simply objective conditions but are shaped through shared meanings, interactions, and collective interpretations (Wendt, 1999). In this view, perceptions of threat, belonging, and identity therefore develop through social discourse rather than automatically from material circumstances. They may be viewed as team players, neighbours, friends or as part of the community, but may also be framed as hostile or competitors for scarce resources, all this due to interpretations that are produced and reproduced through public discussions and the media (Jani, 2025). Thus, migration becomes entangled within broader debates about identity, security, and social order.

A common practice in South African public debates is the association of migrants with unemployment, rising crime, and the lack of adequate public services such as health care and education. These narratives shape how local communities view migrants and affect daily interactions within commu-

nities (Ngubane, 2025). In this context, the social constructivist perspective places emphasis on how tensions arise as a result of socially constructed perceptions of foreign nationals, not on the tensions being a result of economic and social inequalities (Wendt, 1999).

The study addresses the research question: How are social tensions surrounding Zimbabwean migration constructed and articulated at the community level in South Africa? The focus on the community level is important because securitising political discourse does not operate only at the state or elite level but also shapes everyday social relations within local communities. In South Africa, tensions surrounding Zimbabwean migration are most visible in economically marginalised urban communities, particularly townships and informal settlements where competition over employment, housing, informal trade, and public services is highly concentrated (Landau, 2011; Misago, 2017).

These local spaces become important sites where political narratives about migrants are reproduced, experienced, and contested. Examining the community level therefore makes it possible to understand how broader securitising discourses translate into social tensions, exclusionary attitudes, and occasional violence against migrants. This will be done by an examination of the causes of community-level tensions linked to Zimbabwean migrants; particular attention will be paid to the way migrants are described and labelled in public spaces and neighbourhoods. The purpose of the article is to analyse how these tensions are framed within public discourse and everyday community interactions using a social constructivist approach. In doing so, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of migration dynamics between neighbouring countries and highlights the role of social meanings and perceptions in shaping community responses to migration.

While existing scholarship on migration in South Africa has extensively examined xenophobia, migration governance, border control, and labour market tensions (Landau, 2011; Misago, 2017), much of the literature focuses primarily on state policy, national political debates, or episodes of violence. Less attention has been given to how perceptions of Zimbabwean migrants are socially constructed and reproduced within everyday community contexts through media narratives, public discourse, and local interactions. Existing studies often discuss migration as a broad political or socio-economic issue without sufficiently examining how threat perceptions are formed and articulated at the community level (Moyo & Zanker, 2020).

This study addresses this gap by examining how Zimbabwean migration is constructed within public discourse in South African communities and how these narratives contribute to social tensions surrounding employment, security, and belonging. Drawing on constructivist theory, particularly Wendt's understanding of socially constructed identities and threat perceptions (Wendt, 1999), the study contributes to broader debates on migration, discourse, and community-level securitisation in South Africa.

METHOD

The study employs a qualitative research design in the examination of how Zimbabwean migration is represented and interpreted within South African public discourse. Particular attention is given to sentiments about foreign nationals as discussed in media reporting, civil society documentation, and policy-related commentary. In this context, the analysis is guided by an interpretive approach that emphasises the role of discourse in shaping social understandings of migration. Studies have shown that in most cases, migration debates do not emerge solely from demographic realities but are often constructed through public narratives that link migrants to broader concerns about employment, security, and access to public services (Chikohomero, 2023).

This study employed a qualitative research design using qualitative content analysis to examine how Zimbabwean migration is represented and interpreted within South African public discourse. Qualitative content analysis was selected because it allows for the systematic examination of meanings, narratives, and representations contained within textual material relating to migration and community tensions (Bowen, 2009; Creswell, 2007).

The study relied on publicly available documentary sources consisting of media reports, civil society publications, migration research reports, and government policy documents published between 2017 and 2025. The selected timeframe was chosen because it coincided with heightened public debates surrounding immigration enforcement, xenophobic incidents, anti-migrant mobilisation, and renewed discussions about migration governance in South Africa.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select documents relevant to the study's research question. Documents were included if they: discussed Zimbabwean migrants or foreign nationals in South Africa; referred to community tensions, migration perceptions, unemployment, crime, pub-

lic services, or belonging; contained discussions relating to interactions between migrants and host communities; and were produced by recognised media outlets, government institutions, civil society organisations, or migration research institutions.

The final dataset consisted of approximately 53 documents, including newspaper articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and publications from migration research organisations. Media sources included News24, Mail & Guardian, Sowetan, and Daily Maverick due to their extensive reporting on migration-related developments and public debates in South Africa. Additional documentary sources included reports from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS), and the South African Department of Home Affairs.

Each document was treated as a unit of analysis. The analysis focused on identifying recurring narratives, representations, and discursive patterns surrounding Zimbabwean migrants within South African communities. Data analysis followed an inductive thematic coding process. The documents were read repeatedly to identify recurring ideas, keywords, and patterns relating to migration perceptions and community tensions. Initial codes included references to crime, unemployment, labour competition, pressure on public services, outsider status, insecurity, and national belonging.

The codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical themes based on recurring patterns across the dataset. Four dominant themes emerged from the analysis, and these were: the association of migrants with crime; perceptions of pressure on public services; perceptions of unemployment and labour market competition; and the framing of migrants as outsiders.

The interpretation of these themes was guided by a social constructivist framework, which emphasises how meanings, identities, and perceptions are socially produced and reproduced through discourse and public interaction (Wendt, 1999). The study therefore focused not only on what was said about migrants, but also on how migration-related meanings were constructed and circulated within public discourse and community discussions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study outlines the response of South African communities to Zimbabwean migration. The results reveal recurring narratives through

which Zimbabwean migrants are framed in public discourse. It is noted that these narratives do not emerge in isolation but develop within environments marked by unemployment, service delivery challenges, and heightened concerns about security. Four dominant themes appear across the data: the association of migrants with crime, perceptions of pressure on public services, perceptions of unemployment and labour market competition, and the framing of migrants as outsiders.

In South African communities' public discussions surrounding migration associates foreign Zimbabwean nationals with criminal activity. The media reports analysed revealed that most community members often blame migrants for the rising crime levels. It must be noted that although many public and policy narratives refer broadly to migrants or foreign nationals, these discourses often implicitly target Zimbabwean migrants, as they represent one of the largest migrant communities in South Africa. During protests in the local township in Zandspruit, a resident interviewed in a news report blamed criminal activity in the area on Zimbabweans, stating that "it is them who rob the people... the carjackers is them" (VOA, 2009).

Similarly, community protests have also sometimes explicitly framed Zimbabweans as responsible for crime. During xenophobic unrest in Limpopo, protesters marched through the streets carrying placards declaring that they were "tired of Zimbabwean criminals" and demanding that they leave the community (Netsianda, 2015). These forms of public messaging demonstrate how generalized concerns about crime may become directed toward Zimbabwean nationals in particular during periods of community tension. Such statements illustrate how broader narratives about crime and insecurity may become specifically associated with Zimbabwean migrants within local communities. As a result, broader anti-migrant narratives frequently shape perceptions and experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in particular.

In continuation with the crime narrative, reports in the *Daily Maverick* and *News24* document how community protests about safety sometimes evolve into confrontations targeting foreign-owned businesses or migrant communities (Nxumalo, 2025; Simelane, 2022). In a letter to the editor published in *The Sowetan* in January 2025, a member of the public links rising crime rates in South Africa to undocumented immigrants and calls for stricter migration controls. The writer claims that undocumented migrants are "overcrowding our jails" after committing "all sorts of heinous crimes" in the country. The letter further associates migrants with

cable theft and illegal mining activities, arguing that foreign nationals are “burrowing our grounds, stealing our precious minerals,” which allegedly costs the country billions of Rands (Lata, 2025). Such sentiments expressed in public discourse, although not supported by empirical evidence, contribute to fuelling hostility and tensions within communities.

Similar sentiments appear in the *Mail & Guardian*, where community members involved in protests in Diepsloot argued that undocumented foreign nationals were responsible for criminal activities in the area, with one resident stating: “We know them, we live with them. They break into our houses at night and rape us” (Moyo, 2020). Such statements show that migrants are viewed with suspicion in communities and are seen as hostile individuals who threaten the social fabric. These perceptions go beyond individual sentiments and extend into the larger public debates that surround migration in South Africa (Chekenya, 2024).

Reports by the *Mail & Guardian* also indicate that most criminal activities are attributed to foreign nationals. Issues such as drug trafficking and organised crime, when discussed in public spaces, are linked with foreigners, although no formal statistics support such claims (Coetzee, 2019). In addition, similar sentiments arose during the xenophobia episodes in Johannesburg, with residents blaming migrants for crime and social disorder. This goes to show that migrants are usually used as scapegoats during periods of social instability (Njanji, 2019). These views, though a reflection of individual or community perceptions that lack verified evidence, contribute greatly to the shaping of public attitudes toward migrants. The reproduction of these narratives by the media further cements the framing of migrants as security threats in communities. An understanding of how such narratives circulate within public discussions and the media is thus imperative for the analysis of the social dynamics that underlie migration-related tensions in South Africa (Sitto-Kaunda, 2024).

Apart from the association of migrants with crime, another emerging theme is the belief that migrants place a strain on public services. Local communities have repeatedly complained about overcrowding in clinics and schools, which they attribute to the presence of foreign nationals. According to the International Organization for Migration, migrants commonly settle in densely populated urban areas where infrastructure is already strained. In such contexts, residents often experience daily frustrations when accessing healthcare services, housing opportunities, or social support systems

(IOM, 2020). Media reports studied indicate that these frustrations are sometimes directed toward migrants who are perceived as competing for scarce resources.

The *Mail & Guardian* in July 2025 reported on members of the anti-immigration movement March and March preventing foreign nationals from accessing healthcare services at a hospital in KwaZulu-Natal. The chairperson of the movement justified the action by arguing that undocumented migrants were “taking resources away from South Africans” and were responsible for placing pressure on public health services (Bega & Mzangwe, 2025). She further claimed that migrants were “draining” healthcare resources funded by taxpayers and receiving medical treatment and medication at the expense of South African citizens.

The analysis revealed that the contest over access to health care is not a recent development in South African communities. In 2022, Mbhazima Shilowa reported in News24 that activists from Operation Dudula, an anti-immigration movement protesting outside a clinic in Pretoria, sought to prevent undocumented migrants from accessing healthcare services. The author similarly observes that some South Africans perceive immigrants as “placing pressure on already strained public healthcare services” (Shilowa, 2025).

Beyond healthcare, similar tensions have also emerged around migrants’ access to public education. Debates surrounding the enrolment of migrant children in South African schools have also increasingly become a site of contestation within communities. Media reports indicate that anti-immigration activism has also extended into the education sector. Reporting by eNCA documented activists from Operation Dudula visiting schools in Soweto and warning principals against enrolling undocumented migrant children for the 2026 academic year. The group argued that undocumented pupils contribute to overcrowded classrooms and place additional pressure on already strained educational resources (Shaikh, 2025).

Similar incidents have been reported in other parts of the country. In January 2026, News24 documented protests by local parents outside Addington Primary School in Durban, where demonstrators claimed that South African children were being denied placement because schools were prioritising foreign national learners. The main argument of the protesters was that the presence of migrant pupils contributes to overcrowded classrooms and places additional pressure on already limited educational resources (Nxumalo, 2026). Such narratives frame migrants as competitors for scarce public services,

leading to the perception that migrants undermine the welfare of local citizens. As such narratives circulate within communities, they can reinforce exclusionary attitudes and heighten tensions between migrants and host populations.

Perceptions of unemployment and labour market competition emerged strongly in media accounts of tensions between migrants and host communities. Newspaper reporting reflected frustrations expressed by residents who believe that the presence of foreign nationals reduces employment opportunities for South Africans, particularly in low-skilled sectors and informal economic activities. This is seen through coverage in the *Sowetan*, during a protest in Tshwane, where residents argued that employment opportunities in their communities should prioritise citizens, stating that “jobs in our communities must be prioritised for South African citizens” (Moloi, 2025). Many a time, community members frame migrants as direct competitors for scarce jobs in a context characterised by persistently high unemployment. Local newspapers often capture this through interviews with residents in communities where tensions have occurred. For example, reporting in the *Sowetan* during community protests over the presence of foreign-owned businesses showed how economic competition is perceived at the community level. Local business owners interviewed in the report described difficulties competing with foreign shop owners, noting that migrants often sell goods at significantly lower prices, which creates tensions within local markets (Sowetan, 2018). Similarly, a resident interviewed during demonstrations in Mahikeng argued that there were limited job opportunities in the town and complained that “foreigners came in large numbers... and are causing a problem for our small businesses” (Pijoos, 2018).

Further reporting by *News24* on informal labour markets revealed that many locals feel that migrants have a better chance of being hired for informal work, as they claimed that many employers prefer hiring migrants because they are perceived to be more willing to accept lower pay and longer working hours. One local stated that “immigrants will take R100 or even R50” while locals refuse to work for such low pay (Mutandiro, 2019). The resident suggested that this practice disadvantages local workers who are already struggling to secure employment in an economy with limited job opportunities. These media reports help shed light on how labour market competition is understood at the community level. Coverage in the *Mail & Guardian* also documents how unemployment anxieties shape community attitudes toward mi-

grants. In reporting on anti-immigrant protests in Pretoria, residents complained about the presence of foreign nationals, revealing that they are the reason why locals find themselves unemployed. This goes to show that economic frustrations within communities are usually directed towards foreigners regardless of the circumstances (Whittles, 2017).

Reports in *Daily Maverick* similarly note that during anti-migrant protests, the overwhelming sentiments of foreign nationals being responsible for unemployment usually arise in public discussions. In particular, locals believe foreigners have taken over the informal sector, especially fields like construction, domestic work and informal trading, leaving locals with limited livelihood opportunities (Simelane, 2022). These claims thus render migrants as economic competitors in an already volatile labour market. As a result, labour market competition becomes an important narrative through which migration is understood and contested at the community level (Akinmade et al., 2025).

Lastly, the question of belonging and national identity frequently arises during discussions about migration. Media reports and civil society documentation reveal that migrants are often described in ways that emphasise their status as outsiders within local communities (Chiumbu & Moyo, 2018). Statements collected by the African Centre for Migration & Society show that many residents frame migration debates around the idea that employment opportunities and state services should prioritise South African citizens (Murahwa & Misago, 2025). Similarly, the Institute of Security Studies research on *Understanding conflict between locals and migrants in SA* revealed that an overwhelming emphasis is placed on the ‘otherness’ of foreign-born migrants. Furthermore, cultural and linguistic differences worsen the differences between foreign-born migrants and locals. In everyday discussions reported in local newspapers, migrants are commonly referred to simply as “foreigners,” a label that reinforces distinctions between citizens and non-citizens (Chikohomero, 2023).

Public discourse in South Africa frequently constructs migrants as outsiders who do not fully belong within the national community; this is often reflected through media reporting. Commentary in the *Mail & Guardian* notes that migration discourse commonly creates a division between “insiders” and “outsiders”, where foreigners are perceived as threatening the identity of the host society (Winkler, 2017). Similarly, the *Sowetan* documents

community sentiments where residents reveal that they feel as if they are foreigners in their neighbourhoods due to the overwhelming dominance by foreign nationals in every sector of the community (Tshabalala, 2022). This has led to tension and violent outbursts from local communities. *News24* documented xenophobic discourse on social media in which users called for “all foreigners” to leave the country (Khoza, 2017). These narratives reflect how migration is not limited to economic and security debates but cuts across all sectors, including debates about nationality and belonging (Gamage & Nyiayaana, 2026).

The dataset of this study also included policy statements and government-related documents. These documents provide insight into how migration is managed at the state level, as well as the measures and response tactics to migration-related issues. For this study, the analysis focused on the White Paper on International Migration for South Africa as a key policy framework guiding migration governance. The document outlines the government’s approach to migration management, emphasising the need to balance economic development, regional mobility, and national security considerations. An analysis of the document revealed that within the South African government, policy debates on migration are often centred around issues of strengthening border management and security as well as on ways of mitigating the presence of unregulated foreigners. This is an indication that migration governance is an important component of national security and crime prevention strategies in South Africa (South African Department of Home Affairs, 2017).

It was noted that within official discourse, migration is often framed as both an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, policy documents acknowledge that migration can contribute to economic growth, skills development, and regional integration. On the other hand, policy discussions also emphasise concerns related to irregular migration, border management, and pressures on state institutions. The South African Department of Home Affairs highlights the importance of strengthening immigration controls while also developing mechanisms to regulate labour migration and protect national interests (South African Department of Home Affairs, 2017). These policy priorities reflect broader debates within South Africa about how to manage migration in a way that addresses both economic needs and public concerns about security, employment, and service delivery.

Human rights institutions, on the other hand, often challenge these migration-crime narratives, stat-

ing that these allegations are dangerous and give rise to xenophobic tendencies. The South African Human Rights Commission cautioned on official statements that link foreign nationals with crime after the Deputy Minister of Police, Mr Bongani Mkongi, publicly stated that foreign nationals were responsible for crime in Johannesburg. According to the Commission, these claims lacked factual support and risked inciting anti-migrant violence (SAHRC, 2017). The Commission further emphasised that attributing criminal activity to foreign nationals as a homogenous group was misleading and could contribute to heightened social tensions within communities. This shows that while some public narratives associate migrants with criminal activity, institutional actors caution against generalisations that may reinforce xenophobic attitudes.

From a constructivist perspective, the findings demonstrate that perceptions of Zimbabwean migrants as economic and social threats are not naturally occurring or objectively fixed, but are socially constructed through discourse, interaction, and shared meanings within society (Wendt, 1999). Constructivism argues that social reality is shaped by ideas, identities, and collective understandings rather than material conditions alone. In the South African context, migrants become associated with unemployment, crime, and pressure on public services not simply because of their physical presence, but because these meanings are repeatedly produced and reinforced through political rhetoric, media reporting, and community discussions.

Wendt (1999) argues that identities and interests are formed through social interaction. The findings of this study support this argument by showing how Zimbabwean migrants are frequently represented as “foreigners,” “outsiders,” or competitors within local communities. These labels shape how migrants are perceived socially and politically. Over time, repeated narratives linking migrants to economic hardship and insecurity contribute to the formation of collective perceptions that migrants threaten local livelihoods and social stability (Laudau, 2011).

The findings further demonstrate that threat perceptions surrounding migration are intersubjective, meaning they are created and sustained collectively through shared beliefs and public discourse. Newspaper reporting, community protests, and public debates repeatedly associate migrants with unemployment, informal economic competition, and criminality. Although empirical evidence supporting systematic labour displacement or criminal responsibility remains inconclusive, these narratives become socially meaningful because they are con-

tinuously circulated through public communication channels (Huysmans, 2006; Moyo & Zanker, 2020).

Constructivism also helps explain why migration tensions vary across social contexts. In economically marginalised urban communities where unemployment, poverty, and service delivery frustrations are severe, migrants become visible symbols through which broader socio-economic anxieties are expressed. The issue is therefore not migration alone, but the social meanings attached to migration within specific political and economic environments (Misago, 2017). Wendt's constructivist approach highlights that communities respond not only to material realities but also to the ideas and interpretations through which those realities are understood.

The study reveals that discourse plays an important role in reproducing distinctions between "insiders" and "outsiders." Public narratives reported in newspapers and community discussions often portray South African citizens as rightful beneficiaries of employment opportunities and state services, while migrants are represented as external actors competing for scarce resources (Landau, 2011). Through this process, national identity and belonging become socially constructed in exclusionary ways. These narratives reinforce the perception that migrants do not fully belong within the national community, thereby legitimising exclusionary attitudes and, in some instances, hostility toward foreign nationals.

In addition, the findings also show evidence of coexistence and cooperation between migrants and residents in workplaces, religious spaces, neighbourhood markets, and everyday social interactions (Crush & Tevera, 2010). This is important from a constructivist perspective because it demonstrates that identities and social relationships are not fixed or inevitable. Just as negative perceptions are socially produced, more cooperative and inclusive relationships can also emerge through positive interaction and shared experiences. This reflects Wendt's broader argument that social realities are continuously shaped and reshaped through human interaction (Wendt, 1999).

Overall, the findings support the constructivist argument that migration-related tensions are shaped less by objective demographic realities and more by socially constructed meanings, identities, and narratives. Political discourse, media reporting, and everyday community discussions all contribute to shaping how Zimbabwean migrants are understood within South African society. Migration therefore becomes not only a material issue but also

a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by collective interpretation and public discourse.

The findings of this study demonstrate how narratives linking migrants to crime, unemployment, and service shortages circulate widely within public discourse. Such narratives are strengthened by public discussions and media reporting; over time, the repeated framing of foreign nationals as the cause of broader social and structural economic problems leads to social unrest, hence fuelling community tensions (Akinrinde & Tar, 2021). In many South African communities, experiences of economic hardship, insecurity, and inadequate service delivery create environments in which residents search for explanations for their difficulties. Migration becomes one of the interpretive frameworks through which these frustrations are articulated. Zimbabwean migrants, because of their visibility in informal trade and urban neighbourhoods, often become focal points in these discussions (Chikohomero, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study examined how social tensions surrounding Zimbabwean migration are constructed and expressed at the community level in South Africa from a social constructivist perspective. The findings indicate that the presence of foreign nationals alone does not give rise to tensions, but it is coupled with the lens and environment through which migration is viewed at the community level. Media reports and community dialogues often associate migrants with crime, labour market competition, and strain on public resources, contributing to perceptions that position migrants as sources of insecurity and economic threat. These narratives play an important role in shaping community attitudes, often leading to the scapegoating of foreign nationals for broader structural challenges such as unemployment, inequality, and limited service provision. Despite all this, everyday interactions between migrants and residents demonstrate that community relations are not defined entirely by conflict but also include forms of coexistence and economic cooperation within neighbourhoods and informal markets. The study therefore suggests that the social and discursive framing of migrants within public debate amplifies the migration-related tensions, thus highlighting the need for policy approaches that address underlying socio-economic pressures while promoting more balanced public narratives about migration. Future research could further examine how local governance practices and community engagement initia-

tives shape interactions between migrants and host communities in different urban contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article has been funded with the support of the Indonesian AID Scholarship from the Indonesian AID and the Ministry of Higher Education, Sciences, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Indonesia. This publication reflects the view only of the author, and the Indonesian AID and Ministry of Higher Education, Sciences, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

REFERENCES

- Akinmade, O., Adesanya, O. P., & Omeh, T. C. (2025). Media and migration: challenging negative perceptions and misinformation. *Round Table*, 114(5), 558–571. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2025.2517787>
- Akinrinde, O. O., & Tar, U. (2021). An Empirical-Causative Analysis of the Politics of Xenophobia in South Africa. *Law Research Review Quarterly*, 7(4), 383–402. <https://doi.org/10.15294/lrrq.v7i4.48055>
- Amit, R., Kerfoot, W., & Billy, A. (2012). *All Roads Lead to Rejection: Persistent Bias and Incapacity in South African Refugee Status Determination*. African Centre for Migration & Society. <http://www.migration.org.za>
- Bega, T., & Mzangwe, L. (2025). ‘We told the non-South Africans at the clinic to get out.’ *Mail&Guardian*. <https://mg.co.za/news/2025-07-11-we-told-the-non-south-africans-at-the-clinic-to-get-out/>
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & Wilde, J. de. (1998). *Security: a new framework for analysis*. Lynne Rienner Pub.
- Chekenya, N. S. (2024). Migrants and Xenophobic Attacks in South Africa: Theory and Evidence. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241287369>
- Chikohomero, R. (2023). *Understanding conflict between locals and migrants in SA: case studies in Atteridgeville and Diepsloot*. Institute for Security Studies. <https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/understanding-conflict-between-locals-and-migrants-in-south-africa>
- Chiumbu, S. H., & Moyo, D. (2018). “South Africa belongs to all who live in it”: Deconstructing media discourses of migrants during times of xenophobic attacks, from 2008 to 2017. www.sahistory.org.za
- Chivige, T., & Alfaro-Velcamp, T. (2023). Politicisation of Local of Government in Africa: A Zimbabwean Case Study. *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 45(2). <https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v45i2.4332>
- Coetzee, J. (2019, September 5). Prejudice against immigrants’ cuts across class and race. *Mail&Guardian*. <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-09-05-prejudice-against-immigrants-cuts-across-class-and-race/>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Crush, J., & Tevera, D. (2010). *Zimbabwe’s exodus: Crisis, migration, survival*. Cape Town: Southern African Migration Programme (SAMP). <https://idrc-crdi.ca/sites/default/files/openbooks/499-4/index.html>
- Crush, J., Dodson, B., Tevera, D. S. . (2017). *Harnessing migration for inclusive growth and development in Southern Africa: special report*. Southern African Migration Programme. <https://samponline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/SAMPSpecialReport.pdf>
- Crush, J., Tawodzera, G., Chikanda, A., Ramachandran, S., & Tevera, D. (2017). South Africa Case Study: The Double Crisis-Mass Migration From Zimbabwe And Xenophobic Violence in South Africa. In Rep.). <https://scholars.wlu.ca/samp>
- Gamage, S.-I., & Nyiayaana, K. (2026). *Xenophobia and the Social Construction of the “African Other” In Post-Apartheid South Africa*. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS>
- Huysmans, J. (2006). *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, migration and asylum in the EU*. London: Routledge.
- International Organization for Migration. (2020). *World migration report 2020*. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf

- Jani, C. (2025). The Good, the Bad and the Balanced: A critical analysis of the representation of the black African migrants in the South African Daily News and Daily Sun newspapers, 2016-2017. *International Journal of Science and Research Archive*, 17(2), 687–700. <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2025.17.2.3085>
- Khoza, A. (2017, April 4). New social media research finds xenophobia rife among South Africans. News24. <https://www.news24.com/southafrica/news/new-social-media-research-finds-xenophobia-rife-among-south-africans-20170404>
- Landau, L. B. (2011). Xenophobia, Violence and Statecraft in Contemporary South Africa. <https://i.unu.edu/media/unu.edu/publication/19999/exorcising-the-demons-within-sample-chapter.pdf>
- Lata, S. (2025, January 31). READER LETTER | We need our soldiers to help fight crime. *Sowetan*. <https://www.sowetan.co.za/opinion/letters/2025-01-31-reader-letter-we-need-our-soldiers-to-help-fight-crime/>
- Maisiri, L. (2025, May 21). Fort Hare University: Lies and xenophobia distract from the jobs crisis. *Mail&Guardian*. <https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/2025-05-21-fort-hare-university-lies-and-xenophobia-distract-from-the-jobs-crisis/>
- Mbuyisa, N. (2021). Factors influencing xenophobic violence on Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa [Masters Dissertation, University of Johannesburg]. <https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/esploro/outputs/graduate/Factors-influencing-xenophobic-violence-on-Zimbabwean/9917409707691>
- Misago, J. P. (2017). Politics by Other Means? The Political Economy of Xenophobic Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Black Scholar*, 47(2), 40–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2017.1295352>
- Moloi, H. (2025, September 4). IN PICS | Hundreds of unemployed Tshwane residents march to demand jobs. *Sowetan*. <https://www.sowetan.co.za/news/2025-09-04-in-pics-hundreds-of-unemployed-tshwane-residents-march-to-demand-jobs/>
- Moyo, I. (2024). Rethinking diaspora remittances in the post-Mugabe era in Zimbabwe. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 12(9). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-024-00368-1>
- Moyo, K., & Zanker, F. (2020). *Political Contestations within South African Migration Governance*. Arnold-Bergstraesser Institut https://www.arnold-bergstraesser.de/sites/default/files/political_contestations_within_south_african_migration_governance_moyo_and_zanker.pdf
- Moyo, Z. (2020). Foreign nationals need to assist police in curbing crime. *Mail&Guardian*. <https://mg.co.za/article/2020-02-16-foreign-nationals-need-to-assist-police-in-curbing-crime/>
- Muchemwa, M., & Batisai, K. (2024). Social networks and residential choice: Zimbabwean migrants' experiences in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. *Social Sciences and Humanities Open*, 10, 101090 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101090>
- Muchemwa, M., & Batisai, K. (2024). Social networks and residential choice: Zimbabwean migrants' experiences in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. *Social Sciences and Humanities Open*, 10, 101090 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101090>
- Murahwa, B., & Misago, J. P. (2025). Group Tensions and Informalisation of Community Leadership: Factors Affecting Social Cohesion and Collective Violence in Makhanda, Eastern Cape. *African Centre for Migration & Society* https://www.xenowatch.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/v2_Makhanda-Social-Cohesion-and-Violence-Report.pdf
- Murenje, M., & Sibanda, S. (2026). A Human Rights-Based Perspective on the Integration Experiences and Vulnerabilities of Zimbabwean Migrants Living in Johannesburg, South Africa. *Genealogy*, 10(1), 8. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy10010008>
- Mutandiro, K. (2019, June 18). “We will do anything” - Desperate men and women wait on roadside for work. *News24*. <https://www.news24.com/we-will-do-anything-desperate-men-and-women-wait-on-roadside-for-work-20190618>
- Netsianda, M. (2015, February 16). Xenophobic attacks erupt. *Herald Online*. <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/xenophobic-attacks-erupt/>
- Ngubane, L. (2025). The Convergence of Economic Inequality and Illegal Migration Security Implications for South Africa. *Pan-African Conversations*, 2(1), 27-42. <https://doi.org/10.36615/k800sr21>

- Nicolai, C., & Gellwitzki, L. (2025). The Politics of Fear and Hate: Experience, (De)Legitimization, and (De)Mobilization. *International Political Sociology*, 19(2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olaf001>
- Njanji, S. (2019, September 3). Scores arrested in looting, xenophobic protests. *Mail&Guardian*. <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-09-03-scores-arrested-in-looting-xenophobic-protests/>
- Nxumalo, S. (2025, November 7). Fear grips Durban's South Beach as hundreds march against undocumented immigrants, crime. *News24*. <https://www.news24.com/southafrica/news/fear-grips-durbans-south-beach-as-hundreds-march-against-undocumented-immigrants-crime-20251107-0887>
- Nxumalo, S. (2026, January 14). School gate showdown in Durban over 'prioritised' foreign nationals. *News24*. <https://www.news24.com/southafrica/news/school-gate-showdown-in-durban-over-prioritised-foreign-nationals-20260114-0875>
- Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2017). Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 52(3), 253–270. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909615580867>
- Pijoos, I. (2018, May 10). "We want foreigners gone" - Mahikeng protesters. *News24*. <https://www.news24.com/southafrica/news/we-want-foreigners-gone-mahikeng-protesters-20180510>
- South African Human Rights Commission. (2017). SAHRC says Mkongi's statements have the potential to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment. <https://www.sahrc.org.za/index.php/sahrc-media/news/item/754-sahrc-says-mkongi-s-statements-have-the-potential-to-fuel-anti-immigrant-sentiment>
- Shaikh, N. (2025, September 23). Operation Dudula takes immigration fight to schools. *ENCA*. <https://www.enca.com/news-top-stories/operation-dudula-takes-immigration-fight-schools>
- Shilowa, M. (2025, July 8). Resentment over healthcare for immigrants: Is SA repeating history? *News24*. <https://www.news24.com/opinions/columnists/mbhazima-shilowa-resentment-over-healthcare-for-immigrants-is-sa-repeating-history-20250707-0848>
- Simelane, B. (2022, February 20). Fed-up SA citizens take to the streets, blaming foreigners for crime and the unemployment crisis. *Daily Maverick*. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-02-20-fed-up-sa-citizens-take-to-the-streets-blaming-foreigners-for-crime-and-the-unemployment-crisis/>
- Sitto-Kaunda, K. (2024). Evaluating the power of social media influencing mainstream media social representations of migrants in South African townships. *Discover Global Society*, 2(32). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-024-00060-w>
- South African Department of Home Affairs. (2017). White paper on international migration-final version. *Department of Home Affairs*. <https://www.dha.gov.za/WhitePaperonInternationalMigration-20170602.pdf>
- Sowetan. (2018, November 22). Return of foreign shop owners splits locals. *Sowetan*. <https://www.sowetan.co.za/news/south-africa/2018-11-22-return-of-foreign-shop-owners-splits-locals/>
- Statistics South Africa. (2025). Improving Lives Through Data Ecosystems: Report On Migration Statistics Based On Various Data Sources Including Census 2022. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/03-04-04/03-04-042022.pdf>
- Tenerowicz, G., & Wellman, E. I. (2024). The Social Impact of COVID-19 on Migrants in Urban Africa. *Urban Forum*, 35(3), 433–449. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12132-024-09514-5>
- United Nations Network on Migration. (2022). United Nations Pilot Project for Strengthening Migrant Integration and Social Cohesion through Stakeholders' Engagement, Socio-Economic Activities and Countering Anti-Migrant Narratives in South Africa. *United Nations*. <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/projects/united-nations-pilot-project-strengthening-migrant-integration-and-social-cohesion-through>
- Voice of America. (2009, October 28). *Local arson targets Zimbabweans in South Africa*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2001-10-22-17-local-66944097/377739.html>
- Vorvornator, L. K., & Enaifoghe, A. (2024). South African Migration Policy On The Zimbabwean Special Permit Renewal Experience: Diplomacy Of Weapons For Power. *Journal of Law and Sustainable Development*, 12(8), e3514. <https://doi.org/10.55908/sdgs.v12i8.3514>

- Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Whittles, G. (2017, February 13). Xenophobia a convenient scapegoat for Rosettenville and Mamelodi. *Mail&Guardian*. <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-02-13-00-xenophobia-a-convenient-scapegoat-for-rosettenville-mamelodi/>
- Winkler, R. (2017, April 11). In the age of xenophobia, we ought to rethink ‘the foreigner.’ *Mail&Guardian*. <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-04-11-00-in-the-age-of-xenophobia-we-ought-to-rethink-the-f o r e i g n e r />