Change the Narrative about Migrants and Recognise their Positive Contributions in South Africa

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Post-apartheid South Africa experience has painted migrants in a negative light (Landau, 2011). The recurring negative migration narrative, "**ama-kwerekwere are stealing our jobs**" is common and built upon a host of misconceptions emanates from lack of understanding of migrants and migration issues (Misago, 2017). The narratives that migrants steal South African jobs has been expanded to allege that African migrants are engaged in drug peddling, sex trade and human trafficking, kidnappings as well as robberies (Gleason, 2011). Spreading these messages is worse and it can create a challenge for migrant as long the message is circulating thereby causing more xenophobia attacks. This has further fueled migrant-local South African host tensions end up in xenophobic violence. It manifests in the form of looting and vandalism of African migrant-owned shops, assaults, and killings of African migrants. Some of the reasons for these narratives are absence of accurate and reliable migrant stock statistics, lack of awareness of migrant rights and potential positive contributions (HRW, 2020). These narratives do not reflect the reality of the lived experiences of migrants in the country and xenophobic attacks have been the consequences thereof. The frequent arising negative impressions through discriminatory encounters have a big challenge for migrants to lead a decent and stable life in the country (Freedom House, 2017). This has continued to date, concurrently, the country also experiences emigration of its skilled population to more developed countries, an overlooked fact in migration discourses (Misago, 2016).

Contrary to the above negative narrative about migrants, there are huge positive contributions of migrants that needs to be acknowledged and recognized. What is needed now is a change in the narrative and focus on reducing conflict. This will contribute towards improving socio-economic interrelationships between migrants and local South Africans from the grassroots level. It is highly believed that recognition of migrant's potential to make a positive contribution sends an important message that their presence is welcomed (HSRC, 2020). Any Initiatives which welcome migrants can help to counteract these negative impressions and to fight xenophobia.

The recognition of positive contributions migrants can also help to encourage them to interact and contribute more. The recognition can also help to counter the many negative portrayals of migrants that are prevalent in the media and often exacerbated by groups who use migrants as victims, by blaming them for a wider range perceived negative changes in the society. Most of the time these and other type of negative narratives and blame circulate without tangible and enough evidences (HRW, 2020).

Political leaders must be bold enough to speak more positively or at least objectively about migrants. They must be responsible enough to accept that xenophobia is a reality in South Africa and work towards solving the problem with a focus on protecting and upholding human rights. The country's migration policy and legislations should also provide directions on how to utilize the knowledge, skills, new ideas and resources that the migrant populations bring along from their countries of origin. Local authorities can have a decisive influence in attracting investments and stimulating business creation by inclusion of migrant communities. The South African Government and society at large should recognize the positive value that migrants can have in fostering the local private sector. The country's Migration Policy should also look at the specific constraints faced by migrant entrepreneurs who were forced to abandon their businesses due to persecution or conflict. Acknowledging migrants' contribution, facilitating welcoming economy and creating conducive environment are paramount to benefit from their knowledge and skill contributions and recognise the value that migrants can have in fostering the local private sector. One of the objectives of integration and inclusiveness effort should be to enhance migrants' self-reliance. Local authorities can have a decisive influence in attracting investments and stimulating business creation by inclusion of migrant communities. Immigrants bring a diversity of skills; they create employment opportunities for themselves by establishing new businesses and they raise the government's fiscal balance because they are required to pay taxes (Dodson 2010). These and other facts imply that the economic value of migrants to the South African economy is relatively high.

The most important question is, how can be possible changing the negative narratives about migrants in South Africa?

The first and important step to solve a xenophobic attack in South Africa is to identify and change the negative narrations about migrants in the country, define and accept the existence of the said problem (Misago, 2016). Political leaders and media outlets must take a step in speaking more positively and pessimistic views about migrants. This will set a good example, as people tend to follow the direction of their political leaders. Opening up space for more inclusion of migrants in South Africa also help and create a room for migrants and locals to interact and discuss. This is a commendable move by the government to positively change the treatment of migrants. It is a common misunderstanding that all migrants are the same, people must be informed, educated and made aware that migrants are not a homogenous group of people to be held in contempt. Broadly, migrants include refugees, asylum seekers, documented and undocumented migrants, as well as economic migrants to name a few. Migrants are not a homogenous group and include both citizens who move within South Africa and non-citizens holding various permits, refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. Considering These various groups' special needs should be considered differently, for example, women, children, elderly and people with disabilities should be given priorities in policy documents regardless of their legal status.

The country's migration policy should also enable building partnerships with migrants and various migrant sensitive sectors in order to generate, disseminate and utilise quality and reliable information regarding migrants to inform policy and programming. It should also promote an enabling environment for civil societies and strengthen their capacity to engage in migration governance processes; mainstreaming migration into national planning. Special modalities and approaches might be needed to accommodate undocumented migrants at least on a temporary basis on the country's policy discourse. Local authorities have critical capacities to find tailored solutions for the actual protection needs of undocumented migrants based on their local assets. They do so by mobilizing local multi-stakeholder networks: NGOs, migrants associations, charities, universities and private businesses. A whole-of-society approach for migration policy processes will ensure different voices are heard and that no one will be left behind in the "country we need". To do so, strong partnerships are cornerstone. Frontline workers who take the responsibility of integrating migrants into locals and availing basic services should be empowered

with trainings about their roles in fostering migrant integration and ensuring equal treatment in basic service provision. Furthermore, the frontline work force may need to include people with adequate knowledge of migration backgrounds. Local authorities are often in the first line as migrants and refugees' receivers, reducing vulnerabilities by ensuring that local services are adapted to the needs and characteristics of these groups. Beyond reception, lasting and successful inclusion requires mainstreaming migration-related issues across a vast array of municipal competences: urban planning, public spaces, housing, education, culture, access to employment, etc. Sustainable perspective for thriving diverse cities can only be accomplished when migrants are integrated into the local workforce as well as into the local cultural and political life.

The media and civil society organizations have big role in such a way that they can help give migrants and locals neutral platforms to communicate with one another, openly talk about common societal challenges and migrants' issues that are important to them and clarify misconceptions about one another. Additionally, the media can help reduce xenophobic tendencies by reporting positively on sensitive migration issues or even the positive work migrants are conducting in the communities they live in. Migrants and the host community must be common platforms to improve their relationships through cooperation and tolerances that allow them to work together. It is important for both migrants and local South African communities to engage in dialogues when they engage in cooperative projects that serve as networking platforms facilitating the improvement of their personal and professional relationships.

While much is said about the challenges, the migrants may face in the country, it's imperative for all migrants to uphold the laws of the country at all times. I'll write more on this in my next correspondence.

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