



Media Statement

South Africa Must Reject Xenophobia and Address the Real Causes of Economic Exclusion

For immediate release

South Africa's recurring waves of xenophobic protest and violence are a dangerous misdiagnosis of the country's deep economic crisis. The anger felt in many communities is real, but it is being redirected at migrants instead of being directed at the structural failures that have produced mass unemployment, poverty, inequality and collapsing public services.

Xenophobia Is a Symptom, Not the Cause

The real causes of economic exclusion in South Africa are not African migrants seeking survival and dignity. They are decades of de-industrialisation, the hollowing out of the manufacturing sector, deep inequality, austerity, corruption, underinvestment in public services, weak state capacity and an economic model that has failed to include millions of working-class people in productive activity. This has reduced the country's ability to create large numbers of stable, labour-absorbing jobs and has left many communities trapped in unemployment and informal survivalist activity.

At the same time, the state's focus on fiscal restraint and primary budget surpluses has contributed to austerity and chronic underinvestment in housing, schools, clinics, hospitals, local infrastructure and basic services. These failures are then experienced by communities as overcrowded clinics, poor schooling, inadequate housing, unreliable services and limited economic opportunity.

Corruption has further weakened the state's ability to deliver. The crisis in public health, for example, cannot honestly be blamed on migrants when irregular expenditure, looting and underfunding have drained the system. Communities are being told that migrants are the burden, when public institutions have been undermined by poor governance, corruption and a failure to invest in the services people need.

Xenophobia is Scapegoating, not a Solution

Xenophobic mobilisation turns legitimate frustration into hostility against vulnerable people. When the economy fails, migrants become easy scapegoats. Instead of

confronting inequality, corruption, poor service delivery, unemployment and the failure of industrial policy, political actors and anti-migrant movements redirect public anger toward foreign nationals.

This scapegoating is especially dangerous during election periods, when some politicians, movements and local power brokers have an incentive to convert real economic anger into anti-migrant mobilisation. Campaigns that claim to “put South Africans first” may appear to speak to the pain of poor communities, but they do not create jobs, rebuild factories, fund clinics, fix schools, end corruption or expand housing. They simply shift blame away from those with power and onto people with the least protection.

South Africa must reject the false idea that deportations, raids, more policing and harsher border enforcement will solve unemployment and poverty. The core challenge is not the presence of migrants; it is a state that has failed to build an inclusive economy, protect workers, regulate exploitative employers, deliver basic services and create pathways into decent work for all who live in the country.

Migrants Contribute to South Africa’s Economy

African migrants are often portrayed as a threat to jobs and services, yet the evidence in the public debate shows a far more complex and positive reality. Migrants form a small share of the population, participate significantly in the informal economy and often bring entrepreneurial skills shaped by economic conditions elsewhere on the continent. In many cases, they complement rather than displace local labour.

Instead of criminalising migrant workers and traders, South Africa should strengthen labour rights, enforce minimum standards, prevent exploitation and hold employers accountable when they use vulnerable workers to drive down wages. The struggle must be for decent work and fair conditions for everyone, not for division between South African and migrant workers.

South Africa needs the rest of Africa for its Own Development

South Africa cannot build a more inclusive economy by turning its back on Africa. The rest of the continent is already one of South Africa’s most important markets, especially for value-added manufactured goods, agricultural products and services. If South Africa wants to rebuild manufacturing, expand production and create jobs, it needs larger regional markets and deeper African economic integration.

According to the figures available, South Africa’s exports to the rest of the African continent are estimated at approximately R450 billion to R500 billion, representing more than a fifth of the country’s global export mix. These exports are not abstract numbers: South Africa’s merchandise and services exports to the rest of the continent support and maintain approximately 957,000 employment opportunities in the domestic economy, including well over 250,000 direct formal jobs tied to production, manufacturing and farming for African markets.

This trade is especially important because South Africa's exports to neighbouring African countries, particularly within the Southern African Development Community, are far more diversified than the country's raw mineral-heavy exports to Europe and Asia. Intra-African exports are dominated by value-added and sophisticated manufactured products, as well as agricultural goods and services, which sustain a higher concentration of skilled and semi-skilled work inside South Africa.

Agriculture demonstrates the same point. In 2025, South African agricultural exports reached a record global high of approximately US\$15.1 billion, and the African continent bought around 53% of those exports, making it the largest single market for South African farmers. South Africa also maintains important bilateral export relationships across the continent, including exports to Ghana of approximately US\$387 million, or roughly R7.1 billion, and exports to Nigeria of approximately US\$550 million to US\$600 million, supporting a major bilateral trade corridor.

Greater intra-African trade, including through the African Continental Free Trade Area, offers South Africa an opportunity to support industrial development at home, expand exports, strengthen agriculture and create employment. But trade cannot be separated from people. Regional economic integration requires cooperation, mobility, trust and mutual respect. A country cannot seek African markets for its goods while treating African people as enemies in South Africa. For this reason, South Africa should be deepening economic cooperation with African countries, not fuelling hostility toward African migrants.

A growing regional economy needs predictable movement of people, skills, traders and entrepreneurs, supported by efficient documentation systems and respect for human dignity. Punitive responses alone will not resolve the failures of Home Affairs or build the inclusive economy South Africa needs.

The Long-Term Cost of Xenophobia

Xenophobia threatens South Africa's long-term economic and diplomatic interests. Attacks on African migrants damage the country's moral authority, strain relations with neighbouring states and weaken the trust needed for trade, investment, tourism, regional infrastructure and continental cooperation.

South African businesses, farmers, manufacturers and service providers depend on African markets. If xenophobic politics continues to define the country's public posture, South Africa risks undermining the very relationships that sustain export opportunities and future growth.

The economic future of South Africa is tied to the economic future of Africa. A politics of exclusion will isolate the country; a politics of solidarity can help build shared prosperity.

Our Call

We call on government, political parties, civil society, business and communities to reject xenophobic mobilisation and to focus on practical solutions that improve life for all who live in South Africa.

- Condemn and prevent all forms of xenophobic intimidation, vigilantism and violence.
- Address unemployment through industrial development, decent work and support for local production.
- Invest in housing, healthcare, education and municipal services.
- Confront corruption and recover public resources lost through looting and maladministration.
- Protect labour rights and stop employers from exploiting vulnerable workers.
- Fix Home Affairs systems so migration is managed lawfully, fairly and efficiently.
- Promote African solidarity, regional trade and social cohesion.

“Migrants are not the cause of South Africa’s economic crisis. The real threat to jobs, public services and social stability is a macro-economic policy that prioritises primary budget surplus and underinvestment in basic services and a political culture that turns vulnerable people into scapegoats instead of solving the country’s problems.”

South Africa must choose solidarity over division, accountability over scapegoating, and inclusive economic renewal over fear. Our democracy is strengthened when all people are treated with dignity and when government confronts the real causes of poverty and economic exclusion.

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For media enquiries contact: Mervyn Abrahams on 079 398 9384 or Sibusiso Mbotso on 072 483 2344.

Mervyn Abrahams

Programme Coordinator

Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity Group

Email: mervyn@pmbejd.org.za

Website: www.pmbejd.org.za

Mobile: 079 398 9384

