

State must fast track rights at all spheres to ensure no-one is left behind



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Abstract

“Leaders must consider the barriers that limit the meaningful co-existence of asylum seekers and refugees and their SA hosts in cities.”

Keywords

Migrants, asylum-seekers, public services

Migration is a global phenomenon that is characterised by millions of people crossing local, national and international borders daily. Some people migrate legally and others illegally, in search of better social and economic opportunities, while others flee conflict and political instability in their countries of origin. Yet others are in search of better and safer spaces where they can receive an education, settle down and start a family.

According to the UN Development Programme (2017), the refugee population in Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated at 6.3-million, accounting for a third of the global refugee population. This number is expected to increase as nations battle Covid-19 as well as internal socioeconomic and political instability. Countries in Africa and elsewhere in the world that are politically and economically unstable generate significant numbers of refugees, who migrate to well-off countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North America as they explore better opportunities and seek secure, sustainable livelihoods.

In many countries refugees and asylum seekers are unable to engage in meaningful economic activities due to the migration policies of the host countries, thereby rendering them vulnerable to

socioeconomic and political challenges. Furthermore, nationality, race, gender and age often act as stumbling blocks that limit their ability to access public services and resources in the host country. In other instances, challenges such as documentation, personal financial liquidity, academic qualifications and language, among other aspects, limit the ease with which refugees and asylum seekers can access public services.

This inability to access public services and other essential resources often limit the extent to which they can settle and be integrated into society in their host country. This precarious condition makes them vulnerable to various form of prejudices including xenophobic tendencies, which often result in tensions between migrant communities and their local host communities.

The recent anti-African-migrant violence in Durban and other parts of the country are a testament to this phenomenon, especially where there is competition for economic resources and limited availability of public services such as health, adequate sanitation, water, housing and education among other essential services.

Against this background, anti-foreigner discourse in SA has been supported recently by unfavourable public comments by some government officials and societal leaders on immigrants, some of whom are openly xenophobic. The pressures most of SA's cities are experiencing are due to unprecedented physical growth of urban population sizes, partly due to rural-urban migration given the skewed development architecture inherited from the apartheid past. Townships and informal settlements commonly function as entry points for incoming migrants as they attempt to settle down and eke a living.

Despite the hardships of living in such conditions, refugees and asylum seekers always find a way to engage in some informal economic activities to improve their wellbeing and prospects. In some cases, they end up working in low-paying jobs, some of which are exploitative. Sadly, sometimes in the absence of dialogues and interactions between asylum seekers and refugees and locals, relationships between the two groups get strained, creating perfect conditions for tensions to flare up.

The competition for economic opportunities and financial resources are the main sources of these tensions often exacerbated by limited access to essential public services that both groups desperately need for their wellbeing. The limited access to these essential public services and opportunities is often linked to socioeconomic, cultural and political barriers that are created by the interplay between policies, institutions, and economic markets of host destinations as well as individual migrant experiences.

However, the most recurrent barriers that limit meaningful experiences by asylum seekers and refugees in enjoying rights in the cities include linguistic barriers; legal and administrative barriers; reduced access to social networks; inadequacy of skills for the urban labour market, lack of political representation in the governance and local development structures where their interests can be represented and considered to inform socio-economic and development policies. These barriers in many ways limit the ability of urban migrants in accessing economic opportunities and basic services.

So then, do migrants have rights to be in cities? The answer is yes, based on the socioeconomic rights enshrined in the SA constitution and the Bill of Rights. It is a travesty of justice when any citizen, asylum seeker or refugee is excluded from enjoying any rights. However, since the right to cities is often characterised by social and political struggles, political and other societal leaders must consider the barriers that limit the meaningful co-existence of asylum seekers and refugees and their SA hosts in cities.

This consideration is important to ensure core values of human dignity, tolerance, peace, inclusion, and equality are upheld and promoted among all citizens including the migrant community. Therefore, rights to the city essentially connote the right for everyone, including asylum seekers and refugees, to the benefits offered by cities, based on principles of human rights, equity and social justice, irrespective of their gender, race, religion, colour, ethnicity or nationality.

Since post-apartheid SA is premised on a rights-based constitutional democracy, government must fast track the realisation of socioeconomic rights at all spheres of governance. This is important to ensure no-one is left behind or excluded. Moreover, to fast track realisation of these rights at the city level it is becoming increasingly important to increase the involvement of municipalities in migration-related debates, so that cities are well-positioned to respond to the influx of migrants — internal (those who migrate locally) and external (asylum seekers and refugees) — by ensuring the rights to the city are realised, promoted and protected.