Refugees and migration: Local governance, challenges and responses in the city of Johannesburg, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The paper draws from the experiences of the City of Johannesburg, South Africa, to examine the way an emerging democracy can on one hand respond to the challenges faced by the families of its own citizens and on the other hand those faced by the migrant community. It further looks at the costs of not prioritising the needs of the migrant families and the manner in which community integration strategies can assist migrant communities to confront some of the challenges facing their families.
INTRODUCTION

South Africa in 1994 emerged from a brutal system of racial oppression that deliberately put in place policies, laws and practices that sought to undermine the African family and created conditions for its disintegration. The forced labour migration system compelled families to live apart, and the accompanying laws were aimed at eroding the roles and responsibilities of the African families. Recognising that it is the past and present challenges that continue to undermine the family, South Africa is in the process of developing legislation that seeks to “promote family life and strengthen families”. It is thus this development that will influence the country’s approach to the migrant families.

It was post 1994 that South Africa saw a wave of refugees and migrants coming into the country in pursuit of safety from political upheavals in their own countries, and in many instances they were drawn by the allure of economic opportunities in flight from poverty. The South African urban refugee policy is considered to be “progressive and integrative” in that it gives refugees and asylum-seekers the freedom of movement, right to work and access to social services. In the absence of refugee camps, refugees and asylum-seekers bear the responsibility of finding work and to supporting themselves and their families.

At the local level, the City of Johannesburg has adopted the 2040 Growth and Development Strategy that among other goals strives to achieve substantially enhanced quality of life for all. For diverse cities such as Johannesburg, clear priorities exist: using the build form to create greater social cohesion and inclusion, by creating shared spaces for interaction amongst diverse members of the nation, and working actively to build bridges across diverse communities, while focusing on inclusion and well-being for all. These actions are critical in order that diversity may serve as a source of resilience rather than conflict (Joburg Growth and Development Strategy Document).

CITY OF JOHANNESBURG CONTEXT

The City of Johannesburg as the economic hub in the continent is the favoured destination for migrants and refugees from around the country and as such acts as a recipient, a sender, and a transit city for migrants. The migrant integration policy of the City of Johannesburg acknowledges that the migrants whether documented or undocumented live in local communities and as such the city plays an unavoidable frontline role in managing the integration of all classes of migrants.

Migrants—including irregulars—consume services, participate in the informal economy and are predominantly residents of socially excluded areas targeted for assistance. Cross-border migrants are accused by certain organized groupings—rightly or wrongly—of being illegitimate competitors for scarce social resources, including low- or semi-skilled employment and opportunity to trade. The conflicts arising from these accusations, and their consequences, occur and must be managed at the local level, as they starkly did (and were) in the wave of xenophobic attacks directed against internal and cross-border migrants living in Johannesburg’s disadvantaged communities, which occurred over the course of May and June of 2008 (Joburg Migrant Integration Policy).

CHALLENGES FACING FAMILIES

The contemporary family’s content and structure is reflective of the impact of the historical and societal factors. However, what is fundamental is that the family is responsible for socialisation, nurturing, caring for and protecting its members. The reality, however, is that families, migrant and local alike, are under threat and are constantly struggling to fulfil these critical roles.
The challenges facing migrant families can never be looked at in isolation from the challenges of families under distress in host countries and cities. Migrant families join the ranks of the marginalised sections of society whose family structures are weakened and already facing the brunt of the urbanisation movement, characterised by high levels of poverty and inequality, high unemployment, particularly among young people, and disease and overcrowding among others. They come into a contested space for limited resources. Yet, an attempt to treat migrant families’ challenges as a separate category of circumstances requiring a differentiated approach from those of the local population could not only compromise the attention paid to issues migrants face but also expose them to xenophobic attacks.

Migrant families fall under the category of “families in transition.” Families in transition are typically characterised by change or disruptions, which in this case comes as a result of migration. The key challenges brought by dislocation from the support systems and familial connection in the country of origin among others includes not knowing the language, finding accommodation and schooling for children, and accessing skills to compete in the labour market—or simply finding a job.

The proposed legislation on supporting and strengthening families will have a profound impact on the support that the country provides to the migrant families given the fact that families in transition need special support from the state to address problems arising from life changes and events (Patel, 2005). The support will need to be culturally appropriate and sensitive to gender, age, race and disability issues. The migrant families will need to be prioritised like any other family that is under threat, vulnerable or are unable to function optimally in society. The cost of not assisting these families is their members’ dysfunction, a burden not only on other sections of society but on the state itself. This dysfunction manifests as social ills that may include illiteracy, crime, drug dependency, single-headed households, problem youth and other related problems.

CITY OF JOHANNESBURG RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES

Migrant help desk reception strategy

The City of Johannesburg in April 2007 set up the first-ever municipal initiative in South Africa to respond to the challenge of integrating migrants. Like in many countries management of migration is a national government competency, the response thus sought to address local realities. It is an initiative that right from the beginning was developed in partnership with migrant associations and advocacy groups. Five years later, having piloted the locally-based intervention, the city has partnered with NEPAD of the African Union to bring together international organisations like the International Labour Organisation, UNICEF, Southern African Development Bank among others to improve coordination of responses to the needs of migrants and initiate work with sending cities. At the same time the city supported by the United Nations Development Program is in the process of replicating the model in three other major cities across the country.

The city has also received support from the UNDP to strengthen the Migrant Help Desk to better support and respond to the needs of the new arrivals. It is this support that will enable the city to begin to assist both internal and cross-border migrant not just as individuals but also as families. It is a first major step in that direction. In the case of the new families, they will be assisted to understand how the city operates through an orientation programme, touching on things like how to access municipal services, register children in school, learning a local language, training city officials on understanding migrants challenges, educating locals and encouraging migrants to participate in community structures like the school governing bodies, street committees and community police forums.
In the past five years there have been five working groups made up of migrants associations and government departments working on the key issues that inhibit the integration of migrants:

- The Education Working Group strives to assist migrants in attaining access to education. On the other hand, it works with educated professionals to help them gain recognition for their qualifications.
- The Shelter Working Group addresses the dire need for shelter for migrant communities, many of whom live in abandoned buildings in the inner city. This working group has particularly identified the shortage of shelter space for males and family units causing the splitting up of families in shelters, which is a major challenge.
- The By-Laws and Street Trading Working Group serves migrants involved in various small and big business enterprises in Johannesburg. The group is involved in the development of a policy by the Economic Development Department of the city.
- The Health Working Group ensures deeper understanding of the health care system by migrants. While primary health care access is free, there has been a huge problem for migrant patients who do not understand English or other indigenous languages, which places them in a vulnerable and difficult position. This finds parents bringing their children to the clinic to act as interpreters. In partnership with the Migrant Health Professionals and Refugee Nurses Association (RNA) the city has been able to pilot interpretation services at the local city clinics, and parents are now coming on their own. Their privacy and dignity has been restored through this service.
- The Social Assistance Working Group provides assistance to vulnerable groups and is, at times, the only means of hope and survival as the self-integration policy for refugees in South Africa does not provide a safety net for vulnerable groups.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Cities are ideally placed to play a role in building resilient families and nurturing communities. This means access to affordable housing, strong neighbourhood institutions, safe streets, supportive social networks, and an environment that promotes communities and strengthens bonds between families (National Human Services Assembly, 2004). We recommend strategies that put in place programs that work for families, improving their ability to respond positively to an adverse situation and emerge from it feeling strengthened, more resourceful and confident than before (Simon, et al., 2005).
- Protective family support seeks to strengthen the coping and resilience of children and adults in relation to identified risks or threats experienced within individual families. Examples of protective family support include: day fostering for children of drug-abusing parents; refuge and support groups for women who are victims of domestic violence, and support programmes in child behaviour management for parents encountering serious problems in this regard. Protective family support will recognise the value of relationships, routine (such as bedtime) and rituals (such as birthdays and Christmas) in giving greater structure and stability to home life for a child in stressful family circumstances (Galligan, 2000:15).
- Many migrants are in a constant state of fear irrespective of their status, often feeling powerless to claim their rights. We propose working with various institutions to ensure that the protective policies are transformed into protective practices that promote the integration of migrants in particular into community life. Taking into account that the responsibility for this lies with the new comers, it is understood that locals and local government can only play a facilitative role to encourage this co-responsibility.

The major task ahead is based on how local government designs strategies for migrants and their families keeping in mind the host city or country and where they come from. This implies also that cities work even harder to advocate that rights on paper are actually translated into reality for migrants.