

The Expulsion of African Immigrants in South Africa: Implications for Peace, Security, and Regional Stability in Africa

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Abstract

This study examines the recurring expulsion of African immigrants and xenophobic campaigns in South Africa and analyses their implications for peace, security, and regional stability in Africa. While previous studies have largely explained xenophobia through socio-economic, legal, and political lenses, this paper extends the debate by examining its broader consequences for interstate relations, regional integration, and collective security. Anchored in Regional Security Complex Theory and Human Security Theory, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on an extensive review of contemporary scholarly literature, policy documents, and regional governance frameworks. The findings reveal that recurring anti-immigrant campaigns are driven by the interaction of structural socio-economic inequalities, unemployment, poverty, weak migration governance, political populism, historical legacies of apartheid, media narratives, and public misconceptions about migration. These factors contribute to the scapegoating of African migrants and reinforce exclusionary practices that undermine South Africa's constitutional values and Pan-African commitments. The study further demonstrates that xenophobic violence generates significant regional repercussions, including diplomatic tensions, disruptions to cross-border trade and labour mobility, increased irregular migration, weakened interstate cooperation, and diminished confidence in regional institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Although existing regional and international legal and institutional frameworks provide important mechanisms for migration governance and migrant protection, their implementation remains fragmented and largely reactive. The study concludes that addressing xenophobia requires coordinated regional responses that integrate effective migration governance, human rights protection, conflict prevention, socio-economic inclusion, and strengthened institutional cooperation. Such an approach is essential for advancing sustainable peace, regional security, and the objectives of Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Keywords: Xenophobia; South Africa; African immigrants; migration governance. Human security, regional security, and regional integration.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Migration has historically been an integral feature of African political, economic, and social development. Long before the emergence of colonial boundaries, populations across Southern Africa moved freely in search of trade opportunities, employment, security, grazing lands, and social integration. Colonialism and apartheid fundamentally altered these mobility patterns by

introducing rigid territorial boundaries, racialised labour systems, and restrictive migration policies designed to control the movement of African populations. Following South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, the country emerged as one of Africa's leading destinations for migrants due to its relatively diversified economy, advanced infrastructure, and constitutional commitment

to human rights. Consequently, migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Lesotho, Nigeria, Somalia, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and several other African states increasingly settled in South Africa in pursuit of employment, education, business opportunities, and protection from conflict and economic crises (Tawodzera & Crush, 2023; Tewolde, 2023).

Despite its constitutional ideals and Pan-African foreign policy orientation, South Africa has repeatedly experienced waves of xenophobic violence directed primarily at African migrants. Major outbreaks occurred in 2008, 2015, and 2019 and more recently through organised anti-immigrant campaigns such as Operation Dudula and similar movements advocating the removal of undocumented foreign nationals from communities and economic sectors. These campaigns have involved intimidation, forced displacement, destruction of migrant-owned businesses, and demands for mass deportations. While government authorities frequently justify immigration enforcement as necessary for border management and national security, recurring expulsions and anti-immigrant mobilisations have generated widespread concern regarding their implications for regional peace, interstate relations, human security, and continental integration (Thusi & Selepe, 2023; Malinga, 2026; Molelekwa et al., 2024).

The persistence of xenophobia in South Africa presents a paradox. During the anti-apartheid struggle, numerous African states provided political asylum, military training, diplomatic recognition, and financial assistance to South African liberation movements. Since democratisation, South Africa has positioned itself as a champion of African unity, regional cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution through institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Nevertheless, recurrent hostility towards African migrants undermines these commitments and raises important questions regarding the sustainability of regional integration and collective security. Contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that xenophobic violence is not merely a domestic governance issue but a regional security concern with consequences extending beyond South Africa's borders (Chekenya, 2025; Vorvornator, 2024).

Growing anti-immigrant sentiment also reflects broader structural challenges confronting post-apartheid South Africa. High unemployment, widening income inequality, poverty, inadequate public service delivery, weak migration governance, and political populism have created an environment in which migrants are frequently portrayed as competitors for scarce economic resources or as contributors to criminality and social instability. Rather than addressing these structural deficiencies, political narratives often externalise responsibility by blaming foreign nationals for socio-economic hardship. Such scapegoating reinforces social polarisation, legitimises exclusionary practices, and weakens social

cohesion (Gordon, 2024; Tewolde, 2023).

Beyond humanitarian concerns, repeated expulsions of African immigrants carry major repercussions for interstate diplomacy and regional governance. Hostile treatment of citizens from neighbouring states may provoke diplomatic disputes, undermine bilateral cooperation, disrupt cross-border trade, encourage irregular migration, and weaken confidence in regional institutions responsible for promoting free movement, peace, and economic integration. These developments threaten key objectives of the AU's Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), both of which depend upon enhanced regional cooperation, mobility, and mutual trust among African states. Accordingly, understanding xenophobia through the broader lenses of peace, security, and regional stability has become increasingly important for scholars and policymakers alike.

1.2 Conceptual Context

Immigration

Immigration refers to the movement of individuals across international borders with the intention of residing temporarily or permanently in another country for purposes such as employment, education, family reunification, business, or protection from persecution and conflict. Within the African context, migration is driven by a combination of economic disparities, political instability, environmental change, labour market demands, and historical regional mobility networks. South Africa functions as both a destination and transit state because of its comparatively advanced economy and strategic position within Southern Africa (Vorvornator, 2024).

Xenophobia

Xenophobia refers to prejudice, hostility, discrimination, or violence directed toward individuals perceived as foreigners or outsiders. In South Africa, xenophobia has assumed unique characteristics because it predominantly targets other African nationals rather than migrants in general, giving it unique characteristics predominantly against other African nationals rather than migrants generally. Recent studies argue that South African xenophobia is structurally embedded within historical inequalities, political rhetoric, weak governance, and socio-economic exclusion rather than arising solely from interpersonal prejudice. Consequently, xenophobia constitutes both a social phenomenon and a political instrument through which frustrations over unemployment, inequality, and state failure are redirected toward vulnerable migrant populations (Thusi & Selepe, 2023; Malinga, 2026; Tewolde, 2023).

Expulsion

Expulsion refers to the forced removal of foreign nationals from a state's territory through legal deportation procedures or coercive informal practices that compel migrants to leave. In contemporary South Africa, expulsions encompass both official immigration enforcement measures and unofficial community-driven campaigns involving intimidation, destruction of livelihoods, and forced displacement. Such practices frequently blur the distinction between lawful immigration control and collective punishment targeting migrant communities, thereby raising concerns regarding compliance with international human rights obligations and regional migration norms (Molelekwa et al., 2024).

Human Security

Human security shifts the focus of security analysis from protecting state sovereignty to safeguarding individuals from threats to their survival, dignity, and well-being. It encompasses protection from violence, poverty, discrimination, food insecurity, disease, displacement, and violations of fundamental human rights. Xenophobic violence threatens multiple dimensions of human security by exposing migrants to physical attacks, economic exclusion, psychological trauma, forced displacement, and limited access to public services. Consequently, migration governance cannot be understood solely through traditional national security approaches but must also prioritise the safety and dignity of vulnerable populations.

Regional Stability

Regional stability refers to the maintenance of peaceful political relations, effective cooperation, economic integration, and collective security among neighbouring states. Stable regions Low levels of interstate conflict, functioning diplomatic institutions, coordinated border management, and mutual respect for international legal obligations characterise stable regions. by low levels of interstate conflict, functioning diplomatic institutions, coordinated border management, and mutual respect for international legal obligations. Recurrent anti-immigrant violence has the potential to destabilise regional relations by generating diplomatic tensions, reducing economic cooperation, disrupting labour mobility, and weakening confidence in multilateral institutions responsible for conflict prevention and regional governance (Vorvornator, 2024).

Interstate Relations

Interstate relations describe the diplomatic, political, economic, and security interactions among sovereign states. Within Southern Africa, these relations depend upon cooperation in migration governance, trade, border management, intelligence sharing, conflict resolution, and

regional development. The mistreatment or expulsion of foreign nationals can strain bilateral relations, provoke diplomatic protests, reduce trust among governments, and complicate efforts to promote regional peace and integration under the AU and SADC frameworks. (Journals.co.za)

1.3 Statement of the Research Problem

Although South Africa remains committed to constitutional democracy, regional cooperation, and Pan-African solidarity, recurring expulsions and anti-immigrant campaigns continue to undermine these commitments. Existing studies have primarily examined xenophobia from sociological, economic, legal, or public policy perspectives, emphasising unemployment, inequality, service delivery failures, and political populism as explanatory factors. Comparatively less scholarly attention has been devoted to examining how recurring expulsions affect interstate relations, regional peace, conflict prevention, border governance, and collective security across Africa. This gap limits understanding of xenophobia as a multidimensional regional security challenge rather than solely a domestic governance issue. Addressing this gap is essential for developing more effective migration governance policies capable of balancing national security interests with regional stability and human security.

1.4 Research Objectives

The study seeks to:

1. Examine the historical evolution of migration and anti-immigrant campaigns in South Africa.
2. Analyse the underlying political, economic, and social drivers of recurring expulsions of African immigrants.
3. Assess the implications of these expulsions for human security, interstate relations, regional peace, and border security in Africa.
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of AU and SADC responses to recurring xenophobic violence.
5. Propose policy measures that strengthen regional migration governance, conflict prevention, and peaceful coexistence.

1.5 Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. What historical and structural factors explain recurring anti-immigrant campaigns in South Africa?
2. How do expulsions of African immigrants affect peace, security, and regional stability in Africa?
3. What implications do these developments have for interstate relations and regional integration?

4. How effective are existing AU and SADC mechanisms in responding to xenophobia and forced expulsions?
5. What policy interventions can strengthen migration governance while promoting human security and regional cooperation?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing literature linking migration governance with regional peace and security in Africa. Theoretically, it broadens existing debates by integrating Regional Security Complex Theory with Human Security Theory to explain how domestic anti-immigrant violence generates wider regional consequences. Empirically, it highlights the interconnected nature of migration, diplomacy, border governance, and conflict prevention within Southern Africa. From a policy perspective, the findings provide practical recommendations for governments, regional organisations, and civil society actors seeking to balance legitimate immigration management with human rights protection and regional integration. The study is also timely in light of the African Continental Free Trade Area, Agenda 2063, and increasing efforts to promote the free movement of individuals across the continent.

1.7 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Human Security Theory. The Regional Security Complex Theory, developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, argues that security threats are clustered geographically because neighbouring states are interconnected through patterns of security interdependence. Domestic instability rarely stays within national borders; instead, it frequently produces regional political, economic, and security repercussions. Applied to this study, RSCT explains how recurring expulsions of African migrants in South Africa can influence diplomatic relations, cross-border cooperation, migration patterns, and regional conflict dynamics. Xenophobic violence therefore represents not only a domestic governance challenge but also a regional security issue requiring coordinated responses among neighbouring states (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Human security theory complements RSCT by shifting analytical attention from protecting territorial sovereignty to safeguarding individuals against violence, fear, deprivation, and exclusion. The theory emphasises that security should encompass economic, personal, political, community, food, health, and environmental dimensions. Within the South African context, repeated expulsions expose migrants to physical insecurity, livelihood destruction, psychological trauma, and violations of fundamental rights. Combining RSCT with human security theory, therefore, provides a comprehensive analytical framework for examining how domestic anti-immigrant campaigns simultaneously

threaten individual welfare, interstate cooperation, and regional peace and stability.

2. DRIVERS OF ANTI-IMMIGRANT CAMPAIGNS AND EXPULSIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

2.1 Introduction

The recurrence of anti-immigrant campaigns and expulsions in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be explained by a single factor. Rather, they are products of a complex interaction of economic hardship, political opportunism, historical inequalities, institutional weaknesses, social anxieties, and public perceptions regarding migration. Although South Africa possesses one of Africa's most progressive constitutions and has consistently advocated Pan-Africanism and regional integration through the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), it has simultaneously experienced repeated episodes of xenophobic violence directed primarily against African migrants. The attacks of 2008, 2015, and 2019 and the emergence of movements such as *Operation Dudula* demonstrate that hostility toward foreign nationals has become a recurring feature of South Africa's socio-political landscape rather than isolated incidents (Crush & Ramachandran, 2009; Thusi & Selepe, 2023; Malinga, 2026).

Scholars increasingly argue that xenophobia in South Africa should be understood as a structural governance problem rather than merely an expression of individual prejudice. Economic exclusion, weak migration management, political rhetoric, media framing, and persistent inequalities inherited from apartheid interact to produce conditions in which migrants become convenient scapegoats for broader socio-economic frustrations (Tewolde, 2023). Consequently, understanding the drivers of anti-immigrant campaigns is essential for explaining their implications for regional peace, interstate relations, and security governance.

2.2 Economic Insecurity, Unemployment, and Poverty

Economic insecurity remains one of the most frequently cited explanations for anti-immigrant sentiments in South Africa. Despite being Africa's most industrialised economy, South Africa continues to experience persistently high unemployment, widespread poverty, and one of the highest levels of income inequality globally. Youth unemployment has remained particularly severe, creating frustration among economically marginalised populations who perceive employment opportunities as increasingly scarce (Motsepe, 2026; World Bank, 2024).

Within this context, migrants are frequently portrayed as competitors for jobs, business opportunities, housing,

and social welfare. Informal traders from countries such as Zimbabwe, Somalia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Mozambique often establish small businesses in economically disadvantaged communities, where they are perceived as threatening local livelihoods. Although empirical studies consistently show that migrants contribute positively to entrepreneurship, labour market flexibility, tax revenues, and local economic development, public perceptions often diverge from available evidence. Economic frustrations therefore become redirected toward migrants rather than toward structural weaknesses in economic governance (Crush & Ramachandran, 2009).

The scapegoating of migrants reflects what social scientists describe as the "relative deprivation" phenomenon, whereby individuals experiencing economic hardship compare their circumstances with perceived competitors and attribute their deprivation to external groups. In South Africa, foreign nationals become symbolic representations of broader failures in employment creation, poverty reduction, and inclusive economic growth. Consequently, expulsions are frequently justified as mechanisms for protecting employment opportunities for South African citizens, despite limited empirical evidence supporting such claims (Tewolde, 2023).

2.3 Inequality and Competition over Public Resources

South Africa's exceptionally unequal socio-economic structure significantly contributes to anti-immigrant mobilisation. Access to housing, healthcare, education, electricity, sanitation, and social services remains uneven, particularly within informal settlements and historically marginalised communities. In these contexts, migrants are often perceived as increasing pressure on already overstretched public resources.

Competition over scarce public goods intensifies social tensions because both citizens and migrants rely upon limited state capacity. Rather than viewing inadequate service delivery as a consequence of governance failures, many communities interpret resource shortages as evidence that migrants receive disproportionate benefits from government programmes. Political actors and community leaders sometimes reinforce these perceptions by claiming that undocumented migrants burden healthcare facilities, schools, and municipal infrastructure.

However, available research demonstrates that the principal causes of poor service delivery lie in institutional inefficiencies, corruption, limited fiscal capacity, and uneven local government performance rather than migration itself (Thusi & Selepe, 2023; Malinga, 2026). Nevertheless, perceptions often exert greater influence on public behaviour than objective evidence, making migrants vulnerable during periods of socio-economic stress.

2.4 Crime Perceptions and the Securitisation of Migration

One of the most politically influential drivers of xenophobia is the widespread perception that foreign nationals contribute disproportionately to criminal activity. Public discourse frequently associates migrants with drug trafficking, robbery, organised crime, human trafficking, and illegal mining. These narratives have increasingly framed migration as a national security threat rather than a humanitarian or developmental issue.

The securitisation of migration occurs when political leaders, security agencies, and sections of the media portray migration as an existential threat requiring extraordinary state intervention. Such framing legitimises restrictive immigration policies, intensified border controls, mass deportations, and community-led campaigns against undocumented migrants.

Although some migrants participate in criminal networks, empirical evidence does not support generalised claims that immigrants are responsible for South Africa's high crime rates. Crime patterns are primarily driven by broader structural factors, including unemployment, organised criminal syndicates, corruption, weak policing capacity, and socio-economic inequality. Nevertheless, public perceptions continue to conflate irregular migration with criminality, thereby legitimising hostility toward migrant communities (Misago, 2025).

This securitised narrative has contributed significantly to public acceptance of anti-immigrant campaigns, particularly where community organisations portray expulsions as necessary for restoring public safety.

2.5 Populist Politics and Political Entrepreneurship

Political rhetoric has become an increasingly significant driver of anti-immigrant campaigns in South Africa. During periods of economic hardship and electoral competition, some political actors frame immigration as the principal cause of unemployment, crime, housing shortages, and declining public services. Such narratives resonate with economically marginalised communities seeking explanations for persistent socio-economic difficulties (Ringson & Sande, 2025).

Populist political discourse typically distinguishes between "deserving citizens" and "undeserving foreigners", portraying migrants as mobilised beneficiaries of resources intended for South Africans. Organisations such as *Operation Dudula* have mobilised these narratives by advocating the removal of undocumented migrants from communities, workplaces, and informal trading spaces. Although these campaigns often claim to support lawful immigration enforcement, they have frequently been associated with intimidation, violence, and collective punishment directed at foreign

nationals (Thusi & Selepe, 2023; Malinga, 2026).

Political entrepreneurship reinforces xenophobia because migrants constitute politically vulnerable groups with limited electoral influence. Consequently, blaming foreign nationals offers political actors a relatively low-cost strategy for mobilising public support while diverting attention from governance failures, corruption, unemployment, and inadequate service delivery.

2.6 Weak Migration Governance and Border Management

South Africa's migration governance framework faces persistent institutional challenges that contribute to public dissatisfaction. Delays in asylum processing, limited administrative capacity, corruption within immigration services, porous borders, inadequate documentation systems, and inconsistent immigration enforcement have undermined public confidence in migration management.

The Department of Home Affairs has experienced significant backlogs in processing asylum and residency applications, leaving many migrants in prolonged legal uncertainty. This administrative weakness complicates the distinction between documented migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented foreign nationals. Consequently, public discourse frequently treats all migrants as "illegal foreigners", reinforcing generalised hostility.

Weak border management has similarly fuelled perceptions that the South African government lacks effective control over migration. Political actors often exploit these concerns by advocating stricter border security and mass deportation campaigns. However, scholars argue that strengthening migration governance requires improved administrative capacity, regional cooperation, legal migration pathways, and coordinated border management rather than punitive approaches alone (Vorvornator, 2024).

2.7 Historical Legacies of Apartheid and Structural Exclusion

The roots of contemporary xenophobia cannot be fully understood without reference to South Africa's apartheid history. Apartheid institutionalised racial segregation, spatial inequality, labour exploitation, and systematic exclusion, producing enduring socio-economic disparities that continue to shape post-apartheid society.

Many townships experiencing recurrent xenophobic violence remain characterised by poverty, overcrowding, unemployment, inadequate housing, and limited public services. These structural conditions generate frustration among residents who perceive migrants as competing for already scarce opportunities.

Apartheid also normalised forms of bureaucratic control over population movement through pass laws and exclusionary citizenship practices. Although democratic

South Africa rejected these institutions, some scholars argue that elements of exclusionary governance continue to influence contemporary migration policies and public attitudes toward outsiders (Tewolde, 2023). Consequently, xenophobia represents not simply hostility toward foreigners but the continuation of historical patterns of exclusion adapted to new socio-economic realities.

2.8 Media Narratives, Public Opinion, and Social Media

The media significantly shapes public understanding of migration. Traditional media frequently emphasises stories involving migrant criminality, undocumented migration, border insecurity, and community conflict while devoting comparatively less attention to migrants' economic contributions or humanitarian circumstances. Such selective reporting reinforces negative stereotypes and contributes to moral panic surrounding immigration.

Social media has further intensified anti-immigrant mobilisation. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube facilitate the rapid dissemination of misinformation, inflammatory rhetoric, and unverified allegations linking migrants to crime, unemployment, and public service failures. Viral misinformation often circulates faster than official government responses, contributing to heightened public hostility (Ravinder & Kaushik, 2026).

Digital platforms have also enabled the organisation of anti-immigrant protests, boycotts, and community mobilisation against foreign-owned businesses. Conversely, civil society organisations increasingly utilise social media to challenge xenophobic narratives and promote intercultural dialogue. Nevertheless, the influence of sensationalised online content remains a significant driver of public hostility toward African migrants (Chekenya, 2025).

2.9 Public Opinion and Identity Politics

Public attitudes toward immigrants are shaped not only by economic concerns but also by questions of national identity, citizenship, and belonging. Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals categorise themselves into social groups and often favour members of their own group while discriminating against perceived outsiders. Within South Africa, citizenship has increasingly become associated with entitlement to employment, housing, welfare benefits, and political recognition.

Economic uncertainty intensifies these identity dynamics, encouraging exclusionary nationalism in which migrants are portrayed as threats to national identity and economic survival. Survey evidence indicates that anti-immigrant attitudes are generally strongest among economically vulnerable populations experiencing

unemployment, poor service delivery, and limited social mobility (Mpako & Ndoma, 2026). These perceptions contribute to public support for restrictive immigration policies and periodic demands for mass deportations despite South Africa's constitutional commitment to equality and non-discrimination.

The drivers of anti-immigrant campaigns in South Africa are multidimensional and mutually reinforcing. Economic hardship, inequality, crime perceptions, political populism, weak migration governance, historical legacies of apartheid, media framing, and identity politics collectively produce an environment in which African migrants become convenient scapegoats for broader governance failures. Importantly, these drivers demonstrate that xenophobia cannot be adequately explained through individual prejudice alone; rather, it reflects structural socio-economic and political dynamics embedded within post-apartheid state formation.

Understanding these underlying causes is critical because they directly influence regional peace and security. As long as migration continues to be politicised and securitised without addressing the structural conditions that generate public frustration, anti-immigrant campaigns are likely to persist, undermining interstate relations, weakening regional integration, and threatening the collective security objectives of the African Union and the Southern African Development Community. The following section therefore examines how these domestic dynamics translate into broader implications for peace, border security, conflict prevention, and regional stability across Africa.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE, SECURITY, AND INTERSTATE RELATIONS IN AFRICA

3.1 Introduction

The consequences of recurring anti-immigrant campaigns and expulsions in South Africa extend far beyond domestic immigration governance. Although xenophobic violence is often framed as a localised response to unemployment, crime, and irregular migration, its effects transcend national borders, influencing interstate diplomacy, regional security cooperation, economic integration, and Africa's collective peace architecture. From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), security challenges are geographically interconnected; instability within one state inevitably affects neighbouring countries through migration flows, economic disruption, diplomatic tensions, and transnational insecurity (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Consequently, repeated attacks against African migrants should be understood as regional security concerns rather than isolated domestic disturbances.

Similarly, human security theory demonstrates that the insecurity experienced by migrants—including

violence, displacement, economic exclusion, and denial of fundamental rights—generates wider humanitarian and political consequences that threaten sustainable peace. As migration increasingly becomes securitised, xenophobic campaigns undermine regional cooperation and weaken confidence in institutions established to promote African integration (Thusi & Selepe, 2023). The implications are particularly significant for the African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the implementation of Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Nemakonde et al., 2026; Thusi and Selepe, 2023).

3.2 Diplomatic Tensions and Interstate Relations

Recurring xenophobic violence has repeatedly strained South Africa's diplomatic relations with several African states whose citizens have been targeted during attacks. Countries including Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Ethiopia, Somalia, Ghana, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have formally protested attacks on their nationals, summoned South African diplomats, and demanded stronger protection for their citizens (Chekenya, 2025).

For example, following the 2019 xenophobic attacks, Nigeria recalled its high commissioner for consultations, boycotted the World Economic Forum on Africa hosted in Cape Town, and facilitated the voluntary repatriation of hundreds of Nigerian nationals. Similar diplomatic protests have Zimbabwe and other neighbouring countries have also lodged similar diplomatic protests in response to repeated attacks on migrant communities. These developments demonstrate how domestic violence against migrants can rapidly evolve into interstate diplomatic disputes (Nwanze, 2019).

Repeated episodes of xenophobia also undermine South Africa's credibility as a regional leader. Since 1994, the country has projected itself as a champion of Pan-Africanism, conflict mediation, democratic governance, and continental integration. However, persistent hostility toward African migrants creates a contradiction between South Africa's foreign policy commitments and domestic realities. This inconsistency weakens trust among African governments and complicates South Africa's leadership role within the AU and SADC (Bonga, 2021).

From the perspective of regional security complex theory, deteriorating diplomatic relations reduce opportunities for intelligence sharing, coordinated migration management, joint border patrols, and regional conflict prevention. As political trust declines, collective responses to transnational security threats become increasingly difficult.

3.3 Erosion of Regional Trust and Continental Solidarity

One of the most profound consequences of recurring expulsions is the gradual erosion of regional trust. African integration depends upon mutual confidence among states, respect for shared legal obligations, and commitment to Pan-African ideals of solidarity and free movement. Xenophobic violence weakens these principles by fostering perceptions that African citizens are unwelcome despite continental commitments to cooperation (Ezuruike, 2026).

The African Union promotes "An Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa" through Agenda 2063, while SADC encourages regional mobility, economic cooperation, and peaceful coexistence. Anti-immigrant campaigns directly contradict these objectives by promoting exclusion rather than integration.

Furthermore, repeated expulsions generate distrust among neighbouring governments regarding South Africa's willingness to protect foreign nationals. This declining confidence may reduce enthusiasm for future regional initiatives involving labour mobility, migration governance, and deeper economic integration.

Scholars argue that regional integration depends not only upon formal treaties but also upon shared political norms and mutual confidence among member states. Xenophobia therefore weakens both the institutional and normative foundations of African regionalism (Nshimbi & Fioramonti, 2016).

3.4 Disruptions to Cross-Border Trade and Labour Mobility

Throughout Southern Africa, migration and regional trade closely interconnect. Millions of individuals engage in cross-border commerce, seasonal labour migration, transport services, and informal entrepreneurship that link South Africa with neighbouring economies. Xenophobic violence disrupts these economic networks through business closures, the destruction of migrant-owned enterprises, reduced labour mobility, and declining investor confidence (Bhanye, 2025).

Small-scale traders are particularly vulnerable because many rely upon frequent border crossings to transport agricultural products, manufactured goods, and consumer commodities. Violence against migrant entrepreneurs discourages cross-border investment while increasing transaction costs associated with regional commerce.

Labour mobility similarly suffers. Migrants employed in mining, agriculture, construction, domestic work, hospitality, transportation, and retail sectors frequently experience discrimination, employment insecurity, and displacement during xenophobic campaigns. Reduced labour mobility undermines regional economic integration by limiting the efficient allocation of human capital across Southern Africa.

These developments present significant challenges for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), whose long-term success depends upon facilitating not only trade in goods but also the movement of workers, entrepreneurs, investors, and service providers. Persistent anti-immigrant violence, therefore, represents an obstacle to realising Africa's broader economic integration agenda (Africa, 2025).

3.5 Increased Irregular Migration and Border Security Challenges

Ironically, restrictive anti-immigrant campaigns often intensify rather than reduce irregular migration. Fear of deportation, discrimination, or violence discourages migrants from engaging with official institutions, leading many to avoid legal documentation and rely upon informal migration networks.

This dynamic strengthens transnational smuggling organisations that facilitate irregular border crossings. Criminal syndicates exploit migrants' vulnerabilities through human trafficking, document fraud, labour exploitation, and extortion. Consequently, xenophobic campaigns may unintentionally increase transnational organised crime rather than improve migration management.

Border authorities also experience greater operational challenges as displaced migrants seek alternative crossing routes outside formal ports of entry. These irregular migration pathways complicate surveillance, intelligence gathering, and regional border cooperation.

The regional security complex theory suggests that migration-related insecurity is rarely confined to one country. Weak migration governance in one state creates security externalities affecting neighbouring countries through increased undocumented migration, organised crime, and humanitarian displacement. Cooperative regional border governance therefore offers more sustainable outcomes than unilateral enforcement measures (Vorvornator, 2024).

3.6 Human Security Consequences

From a human security perspective, xenophobic violence threatens multiple dimensions of individual security simultaneously. Migrants experience physical insecurity through assaults, killings, arbitrary detention, and forced displacement. Economic insecurity arises through destruction of businesses, unemployment, confiscation of property, and loss of livelihoods.

Social insecurity manifests through discrimination, exclusion from healthcare, education, housing, and community participation. Psychological insecurity results from trauma, fear, uncertainty, and prolonged exposure to violence.

Women, children, refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants are particularly vulnerable

because they often possess limited legal protection and reduced access to state institutions. Human security theory, therefore, demonstrates that migration governance cannot be evaluated solely according to border control effectiveness but must also consider whether policies protect human dignity and fundamental rights.

These humanitarian consequences frequently generate secondary displacement, increasing pressure on neighbouring countries and humanitarian organisations responsible for migrant protection (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024) (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024).

3.7 Implications for Conflict Prevention and Regional Security Cooperation

Conflict prevention depends upon early warning systems, diplomatic engagement, intelligence sharing, and coordinated responses to emerging security threats. Recurrent xenophobic violence undermines these mechanisms by generating political distrust among neighbouring states.

When governments perceive that their citizens are systematically targeted abroad, bilateral cooperation becomes more difficult. Diplomatic resources Crisis management diverts diplomatic resources away from toward crisis management rather than long-term regional development initiatives.

Furthermore, recurring attacks risk provoking retaliatory violence against South African citizens residing elsewhere in Africa. Although such incidents remain relatively limited, public demonstrations and threats against South African businesses have periodically occurred following major xenophobic attacks.

These developments illustrate the security interdependence emphasised by the regional security complex theory. Domestic instability involving migrants can rapidly evolve into broader regional tensions requiring multilateral diplomatic intervention.

SADC's Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation and the AU's Peace and Security Council therefore have increasing responsibility to integrate migration-related violence into regional conflict prevention frameworks. Early warning systems should monitor not only conventional interstate disputes but also recurring patterns of xenophobic mobilisation that are capable of generating wider regional instability (Singuwa & Honrada, 2023).

3.8 Implications for Agenda 2063 and African Integration

Agenda 2063 envisions "An Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens". Central to this vision are free movement, regional integration, peaceful

coexistence, and strengthened African identity (African Union, 2015).

Recurring expulsions fundamentally contradict these aspirations. Xenophobia discourages labour mobility, weakens social integration, reduces trust among African populations, and undermines confidence in continental institutions.

Similarly, the AU Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons seeks to facilitate mobility across Africa to promote economic growth and regional cooperation. Persistent hostility toward migrants creates practical and political obstacles to implementing these commitments.

The contradiction between continental integration policies and recurring anti-immigrant campaigns demonstrates that economic integration cannot succeed without corresponding social integration. Sustainable regional cooperation requires not only harmonised migration policies but also public acceptance of African mobility and shared continental citizenship.

Consequently, addressing xenophobia should be regarded as an integral component of Africa's peacebuilding and integration agenda rather than solely an immigration policy issue (African Union, 2015).

3.9 Theoretical Interpretation

The findings strongly support the explanatory relevance of both the regional security complex theory and the human security theory.

The Regional Security Complex Theory explains why anti-immigrant violence in South Africa generates consequences extending beyond national borders. Diplomatic disputes, irregular migration, border insecurity, economic disruption, and declining regional trust demonstrate that domestic security challenges become regional security concerns through geographical interdependence.

Human security theory complements this analysis by illustrating how violence against migrants threatens individual dignity, livelihoods, and rights while simultaneously undermining broader regional peace. The combination of these theories demonstrates that protecting migrants is not merely a humanitarian obligation but also a strategic requirement for regional stability.

Together, these theoretical perspectives reinforce the argument that migration governance should prioritise cooperative regional approaches that balance border management, human security, diplomatic engagement, and conflict prevention.

4. REGIONAL RESPONSES AND INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

4.1 Introduction

The recurring expulsion of African immigrants and

periodic xenophobic violence in South Africa have compelled regional organisations, national governments, and civil society actors to respond through diplomatic engagement, policy reforms, humanitarian interventions, and conflict prevention initiatives. Although South Africa retains primary responsibility for protecting everyone within its territory irrespective of nationality, migration governance increasingly requires coordinated regional responses because migration, border security, and human security transcend national boundaries. Consequently, institutions such as the African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), national governments, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and civil society organisations have developed various mechanisms aimed at addressing xenophobia, promoting migrants' rights, and strengthening regional stability.

Despite these initiatives, recurring anti-immigrant campaigns suggest that existing institutional responses remain inadequate. The persistence of xenophobic violence exposes important gaps between continental policy commitments and implementation at national and local levels. This section critically evaluates these institutional mechanisms and assesses their effectiveness in promoting peace, migration governance, conflict prevention, and regional security.

4.2 African Union Responses

The African Union (AU) has consistently condemned xenophobic violence in South Africa and reaffirmed its commitment to Pan-African solidarity, the protection of human rights, and the promotion of the free movement of persons across the continent. These commitments are embedded within Agenda 2063, which envisions "An Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa" founded on regional integration, inclusive development, and peaceful coexistence among African peoples (African Union Commission [AUC], 2024). To advance this vision, the AU adopted the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment in 2018, which seeks to facilitate legal mobility, promote labour migration, strengthen regional economic integration, and foster social cohesion among member states.

In response to recurrent xenophobic attacks in South Africa, the African Union Commission has repeatedly urged the South African government to protect foreign nationals, conduct thorough investigations into acts of violence, prosecute perpetrators, and uphold its obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Similarly, the AU Peace and Security Council has emphasised that xenophobia constitutes not only a violation of fundamental human rights but also a threat to regional peace, political stability, and continental integration (AUC, 2024).

As illustrated in Figure 4.1, the AU occupies the apex of Africa's regional migration governance architecture.

Through institutions and policy frameworks such as Agenda 2063, the AU Free Movement Protocol, the Peace and Security Council (PSC), and the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), the Union provides the overarching normative and strategic framework for addressing migration governance, conflict prevention, and the protection of migrants. These continental mechanisms are complemented by regional structures under the Southern African Development Community (SADC), including the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation, the Labour Migration Action Plan, and the Regional Early Warning Centre. At the national level, governments implement migration and security policies through immigration authorities, law enforcement agencies, judicial institutions, and border management systems, while civil society organisations and international agencies, such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) provide humanitarian assistance, legal protection, policy advocacy, and technical support. Collectively, these interconnected institutions contribute to migrant protection, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and regional stability.

Despite this comprehensive institutional framework, implementation remains inconsistent across the continent. The AU Free Movement Protocol has not yet secured sufficient ratifications from member states to achieve full operational effectiveness, thereby limiting progress toward continental mobility and integration. Moreover, the AU's institutional authority is constrained by the principle of state sovereignty, which limits its capacity to compel compliance with continental norms and legal instruments. Consequently, the Union relies primarily on diplomatic engagement, political dialogue, peer review, advocacy, and normative pressure rather than legally binding enforcement mechanisms or sanctions.

Overall, while the African Union has established a robust normative and institutional architecture for migration governance and human security, significant implementation gaps continue to undermine its effectiveness. The persistence of xenophobic violence demonstrates that translating continental commitments into concrete national action remains one of the AU's greatest governance challenges. Strengthening political commitment, improving coordination between continental, regional, and national institutions, and enhancing monitoring and accountability mechanisms are therefore essential for achieving the objectives of Agenda 2063 and promoting sustainable peace and regional integration.

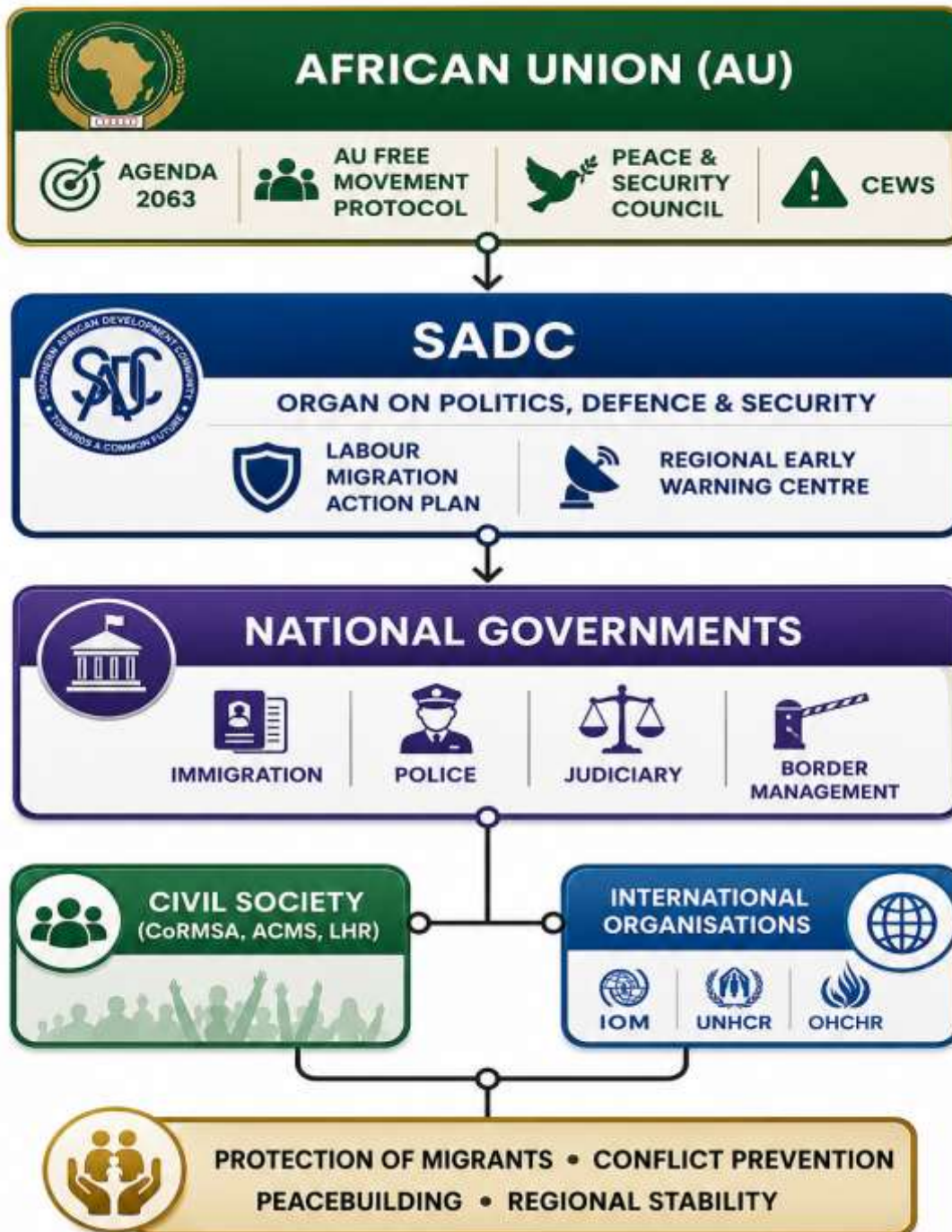


Figure 4.1: Regional Institutional Framework for Addressing Xenophobia and Migration Governance in Africa.

Source: Developed by the author based on African Union Commission (2024), Southern African Development Community (2023), International Organization for Migration (2024), and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2024).

4.3 Southern African Development Community (SADC)

As South Africa's principal regional organisation, SADC occupies a strategic position in migration governance and regional security cooperation. Labour

migration has historically been central to Southern Africa's political economy, particularly within mining, agriculture, transport, and manufacturing sectors.

SADC has adopted several instruments promoting regional cooperation, including:

- SADC Protocol on Facilitation of Movement of Persons;
- SADC Labour Migration Action Plan;
- SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan;
- Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation.

These frameworks encourage cooperation on migration management, border security, labour mobility, conflict prevention, and regional peacebuilding (PACCI, 2020).

Despite these institutional arrangements, SADC's response to recurring xenophobic violence Critics have often described SADC's response to recurring xenophobic violence as cautious and largely diplomatic, despite these institutional arrangements. as cautious and largely diplomatic. Rather than publicly censuring member states, SADC generally emphasises dialogue, consultation, and consensus-building. While this approach preserves regional cohesion, critics argue that it reduces institutional accountability and weakens deterrence against recurring anti-immigrant violence (Crush & Tawodzera, 2023).

Furthermore, SADC lacks a dedicated regional mechanism specifically addressing xenophobia, leaving migration governance fragmented across multiple institutions with overlapping responsibilities.

4.4 Responses by National Governments

Several African governments have actively responded whenever their citizens become victims of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Ethiopia, Ghana, and other affected states have frequently lodged diplomatic protests, summoned South African ambassadors, organised emergency evacuations, and provided humanitarian assistance to returning migrants.

For instance, following the 2019 attacks, Nigeria coordinated voluntary repatriation flights for affected citizens while simultaneously engaging South African authorities through diplomatic channels. Zimbabwe similarly strengthened consular support for its nationals while calling for improved migrant protection.

The South African government has publicly condemned xenophobic violence, deployed security forces to affected communities, arrested perpetrators, established commissions of inquiry, and reaffirmed constitutional protections for all residents regardless of nationality.

However, critics argue that government responses have often been reactive rather than preventive. Law enforcement interventions generally occur after violence has already erupted, while structural drivers—including unemployment, misinformation, weak migration governance, and political rhetoric—receive comparatively

less sustained attention (Thusi & Selepe, 2023; Malinga, 2026).

Moreover, inconsistent political messaging occasionally undermines official commitments. Statements linking undocumented migration to unemployment or crime sometimes reinforce public perceptions that migrants constitute security threats, inadvertently legitimising anti-immigrant mobilisations.

4.5 Multi-Level Institutional Responses to Xenophobia and Migration Governance

Addressing recurring xenophobic violence and the expulsion of African migrants requires coordinated action across multiple levels of governance involving regional organisations, national governments, international agencies, and civil society organisations. Collectively, these actors constitute Africa's institutional architecture for promoting migration governance, protecting migrants' rights, preventing conflict, and strengthening regional peace and security.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have become indispensable partners in responding to xenophobic violence. Organisations such as the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA), Lawyers for Human Rights, the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS), the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), faith-based organisations, and refugee associations provide humanitarian relief, legal representation, psychosocial support, advocacy, public awareness campaigns, and mediation between migrants and host communities. They also document human rights violations, monitor xenophobic incidents, challenge unlawful deportations through litigation, and generate empirical evidence that informs migration policy and academic research. Despite these contributions, CSOs continue to face funding shortages, political resistance, security risks, and limited participation in policy formulation, restricting their long-term impact.

International organisations complement national and regional efforts by providing technical expertise, humanitarian assistance, and institutional capacity-building. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) supports migrant protection, displacement tracking, migration governance, border management, capacity development, and voluntary humanitarian return programmes. Similarly, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) strengthens refugee protection systems through legal assistance, asylum support, and humanitarian coordination, while the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) continues to emphasise states' obligations to protect migrants from discrimination, regardless of their immigration status. However, the effectiveness of these organisations largely depends on the political commitment and cooperation of national governments.

Regional responses increasingly emphasise balancing border security with the protection of migrants' rights. Existing governance frameworks—including the AU Migration Policy Framework for Africa, the AU Free Movement Protocol, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, the SADC Labour Migration Action Plan, South Africa's Immigration Act, the Refugees Act, and the Border Management Authority Act—provide an extensive legal and policy foundation for migration governance. Likewise, regional security institutions such as the AU's Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and SADC's Regional Early Warning Centre (REWC) provide mechanisms for monitoring threats to peace and security. Nevertheless, migration-related violence has received comparatively limited attention within these early warning systems despite its recurring nature.

Strengthening conflict prevention requires integrating migration-specific indicators into regional early warning mechanisms. Indicators such as escalating anti-immigrant political rhetoric, online hate speech, attacks on

migrant-owned businesses, localised community protests, and sudden displacement patterns should be systematically monitored to enable preventive intervention before violence escalates. Such an approach aligns closely with human security theory by emphasising prevention rather than reactive crisis management.

Regional and international legal instruments—including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention, and South Africa's Constitution—collectively prohibit discrimination, arbitrary detention, collective expulsion, and violations of due process. Although these instruments provide comprehensive legal protections, recurring xenophobic attacks demonstrate a persistent gap between legal commitments and practical implementation (United Nations, 2023).

Table 1: Evaluation of Regional Responses and Institutional Mechanisms Addressing Xenophobia and Migration Governance in Southern Africa

Institution	Major Response	Main Limitation
African Union	Normative frameworks, diplomacy	Weak enforcement powers
SADC	Regional cooperation, dialogue	Consensus-based decision making
South African Government	Law enforcement, migration policy	Mostly reactive responses
National Governments	Diplomatic protests, citizen protection	Limited influence over SA domestic policy
Civil Society	Legal aid, humanitarian assistance, advocacy	Funding and capacity constraints
IOM/UNHCR	Technical support, migrant protection	Dependence on state cooperation

Source: Compiled by the author from the literature reviewed in Sections 4.2–4.5.

4.6 Institutional Gaps, Theoretical Interpretation, and Future Directions

Despite the existence of extensive regional and international migration governance frameworks, institutional responses to xenophobic violence remain constrained by significant implementation challenges. Weak enforcement mechanisms limit the ability of the African Union and SADC to ensure member-state compliance with migration and human rights obligations, while fragmented institutional coordination among immigration authorities, police services, municipalities, labour departments, and regional organisations undermines effective policy implementation. Administrative backlogs, asylum processing delays, corruption, inadequate border infrastructure, limited intelligence sharing, and insufficient financial and technical resources further weaken migration governance (Vanheukelom & Bertelsmann-Scott, 2016).

Political sensitivities surrounding immigration also constrain institutional effectiveness. Migration has become highly politicised in South Africa, leading

governments to prioritise domestic political considerations over regional cooperation and human rights obligations. Consequently, institutional responses remain largely reactive, focusing on policing and humanitarian assistance after violence has occurred rather than addressing its underlying structural causes through preventive governance, public education, and socio-economic reform. Persistent misinformation and negative public perceptions regarding migrants further complicate these efforts.

The findings reinforce the explanatory value of both Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Human Security Theory. RSCT demonstrates that xenophobic violence and migration-related insecurity generate spillover effects that transcend national borders, affecting interstate relations, regional diplomacy, cross-border trade, labour mobility, and collective security. This interdependence illustrates why unilateral national responses are insufficient and why coordinated regional

governance is essential. Human Security Theory complements this perspective by emphasising that effective migration governance must prioritise the protection of individuals alongside territorial integrity, recognising that violence against migrants ultimately undermines broader regional peace and stability (Okello, 2026).

The analysis shows that Africa has a strong institutional framework for dealing with migration governance and protecting migrants' rights. However, implementation is still patchy and inconsistent. Achieving the objectives of Agenda 2063 and strengthening regional peace, therefore, requires harmonised migration policies, stronger enforcement of existing legal instruments, enhanced regional early warning systems, improved interstate intelligence sharing, sustained public education against xenophobia, and deeper collaboration among governments, regional organisations, civil society, and international partners. Without addressing these institutional weaknesses, recurring anti-immigrant campaigns will continue to threaten human security, regional integration, and interstate cooperation across Africa.

5. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the implications of the recurring expulsion of African immigrants and anti-immigrant campaigns in South Africa for peace, security, and regional stability in Africa. Drawing on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Human Security Theory, the study argued that xenophobic violence and forced expulsions are not merely domestic immigration or law enforcement issues but multidimensional regional security challenges with significant political, economic, humanitarian, and diplomatic consequences.

The analysis demonstrated that recurring anti-immigrant campaigns are driven by an interaction of structural socio-economic inequalities, persistent unemployment, poverty, weak migration governance, political populism, historical legacies of apartheid, negative media narratives, and widespread public misconceptions regarding migration. These factors collectively create an environment in which African migrants become convenient scapegoats for broader governance failures. Consequently, xenophobia has evolved beyond isolated incidents of social violence into a recurring governance challenge that undermines South Africa's constitutional values, Pan-African commitments, and international human rights obligations.

The findings further revealed that xenophobic violence has profound effects on interstate relations and regional peace. Repeated attacks on African migrants have generated diplomatic tensions between South Africa and several African states, weakened mutual trust within regional organisations, disrupted cross-border trade and

labour mobility, increased irregular migration, complicated border security, and undermined regional conflict prevention efforts. These developments directly contradict the aspirations of the African Union's Agenda 2063, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and broader continental efforts to promote free movement, regional integration, and peaceful coexistence.

The evaluation of institutional responses also revealed that although the African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), national governments, international organisations, and civil society organisations have established an extensive legal and institutional framework for migration governance and migrant protection, implementation remains uneven and largely reactive. Weak enforcement mechanisms, fragmented institutional coordination, political sensitivities surrounding migration, limited early warning systems, and inadequate public education continue to constrain the effectiveness of regional responses. The study therefore finds that the principal challenge lies not in the absence of policy frameworks but in the persistent implementation gap between legal commitments and practical protection of migrants.

The theoretical analysis confirms the relevance of both the Regional Security Complex Theory and the Human Security Theory. Regional Security Complex Theory explains how domestic migration-related insecurity generates spillover effects that influence neighbouring states through diplomacy, migration flows, economic interdependence, and regional security dynamics. Human security theory complements this perspective by demonstrating that the protection of migrants' lives, dignity, and livelihoods is essential for sustainable peace and regional stability. Together, these theoretical perspectives reinforce the argument that effective migration governance requires integrated approaches that balance state security with the protection of human security.

Overall, the study concludes that the recurring expulsion of African immigrants represents one of the most significant non-traditional security challenges confronting Southern Africa. Unless its structural drivers are effectively addressed through coordinated regional action, xenophobic violence will continue to undermine interstate relations, weaken regional integration, and threaten the long-term objectives of peace, security, and sustainable development across the African continent.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study proposes the following policy recommendations.

Strengthen Regional Migration Governance

The African Union and SADC should accelerate the implementation of the AU Migration Policy Framework,

the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, and regional labour mobility agreements. Member states should harmonise migration policies, improve immigration administration, reduce asylum processing delays, and establish integrated migration management systems that balance border security with the protection of migrants' rights.

Enhance Bilateral and Multilateral Diplomatic Cooperation

South Africa and neighbouring African states should strengthen diplomatic engagement through regular bilateral consultations, joint migration commissions, and information-sharing mechanisms. These platforms should facilitate coordinated responses to migration challenges while reducing interstate tensions arising from xenophobic incidents.

Adopt Cooperative Border Security Approaches

Border management should move beyond militarised enforcement towards cooperative security strategies that involve intelligence sharing, joint border patrols, biometric information systems, and coordinated efforts to combat human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and transnational organised crime. Such approaches should be implemented within a human rights framework that protects vulnerable migrants while addressing legitimate security concerns.

Strengthen Early Warning and Conflict Prevention Mechanisms

The AU Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and the SADC Regional Early Warning Centre (REWC) should incorporate migration-related indicators—including anti-immigrant political rhetoric, online hate speech, attacks on migrant-owned businesses, and localised community tensions—into their monitoring frameworks. Early detection of these indicators would enable preventive interventions before violence escalates.

Promote Public Education and Social Cohesion

Governments, educational institutions, media organisations, religious bodies, and civil society organisations should collaborate to implement sustained public awareness campaigns aimed at countering xenophobia, misinformation, and harmful stereotypes about migrants. Educational curricula and community dialogue programmes should promote Pan-African values, constitutional rights, cultural diversity, and peaceful coexistence.

Address Structural Socio-Economic Drivers

Long-term prevention requires addressing the

structural conditions that fuel anti-immigrant sentiment. Governments should prioritise inclusive economic development, employment creation, poverty reduction, improved public service delivery, youth empowerment, and equitable access to economic opportunities. Reducing socio-economic inequalities would lessen the conditions under which migrants become scapegoats for broader governance failures.

Strengthen Legal Protection and Accountability

South Africa should strengthen the enforcement of constitutional protections, migration legislation, and international human rights obligations by ensuring prompt investigation and prosecution of perpetrators of xenophobic violence. Law enforcement agencies should receive specialised training in migrant protection, anti-discrimination standards, and community policing. Accountability mechanisms should also be strengthened to discourage impunity.

Expand the Role of Civil Society and International Organisations

Governments should institutionalise partnerships with civil society organisations, refugee associations, academic institutions, and international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). These partnerships should support humanitarian assistance, policy research, legal aid, community mediation, and evidence-based migration governance.

Strengthen Regional Research and Data Systems

The AU, SADC, universities, and research institutions should establish coordinated regional databases on migration trends, xenophobic incidents, forced displacement, and cross-border security risks. Reliable and comparable data would improve evidence-based policymaking, strengthen early warning systems, and facilitate regional cooperation.

5.3 Final Reflection

The future of African integration depends not only on the removal of physical borders but also on the cultivation of mutual trust, solidarity, and shared responsibility among African states and peoples. As Africa advances the implementation of Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area, the protection of migrants must be recognised as both a human rights obligation and a strategic imperative for regional peace and security. Sustainable solutions therefore require moving beyond reactive responses toward comprehensive migration governance that integrates security cooperation, socio-economic inclusion, diplomatic engagement, conflict prevention, and respect for human dignity. Only through

such coordinated and preventive approaches can South Africa, the African Union, SADC, and other regional stakeholders effectively address xenophobia while advancing the broader goals of continental integration, peaceful coexistence, and sustainable development.

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