

Strengthening Strategic Engagement and Movement Building for Migrant Rights in South & Southern Africa

Research Brief 1

Marlise Richter & Rebecca Walker
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I. Introduction and Background

This brief draws from a research project ('Strengthening Strategic Engagement and Movement Building for Migrant Rights in South & Southern Africa') that aims to investigate the viability of movement building for migrant rights in South Africa (SA). The South African context is characterized by growing xenophobic populism and discrimination, as well as push-back by an active, albeit fragmented civil society ecosystem. Conducted by the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS), this research project seeks to define strategic and proactive advocacy for migrant rights, identify engagement strategies with various partners, and support the migrant sector in crafting new narratives and long-term strategies to shift policy perspectives.

Migration and xenophobia remain central issues in SA's public discourse, particularly in the lead up to the 2024 national elections where they became key rallying points. Of 18 political parties that won seats in the 2024 Parliament, 17 addressed migration in their election manifestos to varying degrees. During the campaign period, xenophobic rhetoric was increasingly weaponised. Cross-border migrants were scapegoated for government failures in service-delivery, corruption and rising crime. Undocumented migrants were particularly singled out as the root cause of systemic and institutional failures, making them the primary targets of populist narratives. Parties as such Operation Dudula and the Patriotic Alliance capitalized on these sentiments further entrenching anti-migrant rhetoric.

Despite SA's long history of internal and cross-border migration, the country's increasingly restrictive approach to migration reflects a broader global trend of rising anti-immigrant sentiments and exclusionary policy-making. Within a few days of assuming his second term, US President Donald Trump signed a series of executive orders aimed at restricting migration, facilitating mass deportations and arrests and halting the processing of asylum seekers.¹ Given the US's immense geopolitical influence, such actions are likely to embolden similar approaches elsewhere. Meanwhile, across Europe and the UK, hard-right anti-immigrant sentiments are fast becoming centre-stage in the political landscape.²

This project explores whether changes in SA's political landscape following the 2024 national elections might signal the potential for a change to migration issues domestically. Specifically, it explores whether the Government of National Unity and the appointment of a new Democratic Alliance Minister of the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) could provide leverage for a more progressive approach to cross-border migrants in comparison to under an ANC majority government. These domestic developments, together with the consideration of geopolitical risks, increasing migration³ and the growing impact of climate change on human mobility⁴ ensure that migration will remain a key political issue in the years ahead.

Despite decades of advocacy for asylum seekers, refugees, and other migrants, rising hostility towards non-citizens signals the need for a proactive and adaptive migrant advocacy across multiple scales. As the local

¹ Nadine Yousif, 'Six Big Immigration Changes under Trump- and Their Impact so Far' *BBC* 27 January 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyn2p8x2eyo>.

² J. Sondel- Cedarmas and F Berti (eds) *The Right- Wing Critique of Europe Nationalist, Sovereignist and Right- Wing Populist Attitudes to the EU 2022*, Routledge: New York

³ M McAuliffe, and LA Ouchou, 'World Migration Report 2024' Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2025..

⁴ Stephanie Nawyn et al., 'Mapping the Future of Migration and Climate Change Science', *International Migration Review* 58, no. 4 (1 December 2024): 1913–36.

government agenda comes into focus, such interventions must range from neighbourhood advocacy to regional efforts through the African Union and engagement with global institutions.

Against this background, this research project interrogates whether movement-building around migrant rights is strategic and viable in SA. If so, it considers how it should be approached. It also asks whether alternatives to a rights-based approach to migration should be considered, and what narrative change strategies would be the most impactful for the current South African context.

Drawing from the first phase of the project, this Research Brief summarises the findings of key informant interviews conducted at the end of 2024 and validated by a subsequent deliberation workshop held on 30 January 2025.

II. Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 individuals working in the migration sector and broader civil society in SA. Interviewees mainly identified as advocates, activists, researchers, or programme implementers. While most were based at NGOs focused on migrant issues, a few represented civil society organisations where migrancy is not a central focus, as well as international agencies.

Interview questions explored the characteristics of organisations working in the migrant sector in SA, emerging new opportunities for advancing migrant rights, and potential advocacy strategies for doing so. A key focus was identifying successful or innovative advocacy strategies and envisioning effective movement-building.

Preliminary research findings were presented at a Deliberation Workshop held in Johannesburg in January 2025 and participant discussions and analyses informed the final draft of this Research Brief.

III. Findings

3.1 Migrant organisations⁵ in South Africa

3.1.1 Strengths, Weaknesses and Challenges

Strengths

Interviewees highlighted various strengths within the migrant organisations that included collaboration between academics, researchers and civil society, which has contributed to broader awareness of migrant issues within society. There has also been **an increase in migrant-led organisations** within the migration sector (hereinafter the “Sector”) allowing for more direct representation and advocacy as migrants can “*speak with their own voices*”. Additionally, **migrant-led organisations have become more organised, knowledgeable and strategic in their approach**. Some interviewees pointed to the Sector’s continued faith in the SA Constitution

⁵ For present purposes, a migrant organisation’ refers to any organisation, whether managed by migrants themselves or by others, that serves the needs and rights of migrants.

and the lasting impact of litigation issues. Others noted that there was more consolidation within the Sector with organisations becoming better connected, with greater professionalism and sophistication.

Weaknesses

Interviewees also noted a number of weaknesses within the Sector. Some described the Sector as **fragmented and weak and “working in siloes”**. One interviewee attributed this to *“cultural differences”*, while others framed it as *“turf war”* where *“xenophobia within the [Migrant Sector] community impedes service-delivery”*. The latter attributed it to a lack of recognition of the needs of the broader community of migrants, and not just a narrow focus on one’s own key issues as a sub-group of migrants.

An interviewee noted that some migrant cases would be continually referred between migrant organisations without resolution, leading to inefficiencies and duplication of work within the Sector. However, this contradicts the observations of a number of other interviewees who observed collaboration within the Sector. **Further work is needed to explore this tension - whether it is possible that some organisations collaborate closely on particular issues, while the Sector as a whole remains poorly coordinated.**

Challenges

Funding

Funding emerged as a key challenge. There was widespread acknowledgement of limited financial resources, and the difficulties in scaling up successful initiatives by migrant organisations. Some interviewees noted that **funding disparities could lead to distrust and internal conflict over resources** within organisations. Others raised concerns about instances of **fraud and mismanagement**, which have led to organisational closure. An interviewee from **a funding organisation described how “significant amounts of money” have been lost to corruption and mismanagement**, a concern echoed by workshop participants. Additionally, stringent legal and financial requirements for NGOs create barriers for organisations lacking financial and management expertise. Conversely, formally registered NGOs have stronger advocacy influence, which likely places them in a better position to raise funds.

A workshop respondent highlighted **how funders contribute to divisions within the Sector** through the imposition of strict funding categories which may for example, separate refugee-led organisations from mainstream NGOs, even when the latter may have strong refugee leadership or a hybrid management model. This rigid categorisation fuels competition and mistrust between organisations, thus raising questions about how funding structures can be adapted to better support cross-sector collaboration.

External forces and overwhelming demand for services

Many respondents noted the dire context within which the Sector works. This included powerful repressive forces currently working against progressive civil society - not just against those advocating for migrant-rights. This repression manifests in various ways, including the **proliferation of vigilantism and silencing or even killing of rights activists**, restrictions on press freedom and attacks on diversity, inclusion and equity programmes. Additionally, many in the sector are overworked and burnt out struggling to respond to the *“overwhelming need”* for services.

Unsustainability

Several respondents also observed that public and media interest in migration issues tends to be peak during xenophobic violence or crises. One noted the "ebb and flow" of attention, explaining that organisations tend to form around immediate threats and "groundswells of danger" but struggle to build sustainable, long-term structures. **The challenge for migrant rights organisations is to create lasting, resilient advocacy efforts that extend beyond crisis responses.**

3.1.2 Footprint

There were no clear-cut answers regarding whether the footprint of migrant organisation has increased or decreased over the past five years. Many interviewees were unsure and provided nuanced responses. **Some observed that while organisational names may have changed, the same individuals remain active in the Sector – describing it as "different names, same actors"** and noting that "it is the same people in the room, but they wear different hats". Indeed, some deliberation workshop participants reported representing -or belonging to different organisations. Despite this uncertainty all interviewees acknowledged the relevance and importance of migrant organisations. Several noted **an increase in the number of migrant-led organisations, reflecting greater representation and self-advocacy within the sector.**

Those who were "unsure" about changes in the size of the footprint, highlighted shifts in the focus and scope of organisations. They claimed that some migrant rights organisations (mainly focused on legal responses and education) have transitioned into migrant service organisations (providing direct social services).

New actors in the Migrant Rights ecosystem

Workshop participants noted the emergence of powerful new actors in the migrant rights landscape and included the negative impact of the formation of the populist MK party and the increasing popularity of the Patriotic Alliance. The mainstream media, the media platform X and the EU were perceived as becoming more hostile towards migrant issues since 2022. The emergence of Kopanang Africa against Xenophobia and the "Durban Coalition" were seen as allies or champions of migrant rights.

3.2 Migrant Rights

3.2.1 Definitions

When asked to define migrant rights, the majority of interviewees struggled to provide a clear and concise definition. Many automatically referenced the South African Constitution and the legal victories achieved by strategic litigation, but without necessarily defining what migrant rights entail. This reflects a broader challenges **with the use of the term "migrant rights", which is widely used, yet often lacks a specific understanding as to whom qualifies as a migrant, and which rights are invoked.** Additionally, some informants pointed to the stigma attached to the term "migrant".

Two interviewees highlighted the need for clearer definitions stating: "What do we really means by migrant rights? We need a unified agenda" and "When you use the word "migrant" you need to be clear what you are talking about and what you are legally entitled to". Participants at the workshop echoed this perspective emphasising the importance of framing the conversation in terms of "human rights" rather than "migrant rights" to reinforce a shared sense of humanity. In the South African context, the term "migrant" primarily

refers to cross-border migrants, encompassing asylum seekers, economic migrants, and undocumented migrants, all of whom have different rights and access to protections. However, the discourse remains largely centred on international migration, overlooking the complexities of internal migration in SA.

One interviewee raised ethical concern about focusing narrowly on migrant rights when many South Africans experience the same rights violations. This perspective challenges an exclusive emphasis on migrant rights, particularly in a context where widespread service-delivery failures, mismanagement, and corruption have left many South Africans disillusioned. **The risk, they noted is that migrant-specific advocacy could inadvertently deepen resentment among local populations who feel neglected by the state.**

3.2.2 Considering Opportunities and Successes for Advancing Migrant Advocacy

The interview guide intentionally emphasised opportunities, rather than challenges, encouraging interviewees to explore potential for advancing migrant advocacy. However, nearly all interviewees struggled with this question. A number remarked that it was difficult to envisage opportunities given the number of challenges and the level of despondency. Responses such as *“there is a lot of darkness at the moment”*, and *“I am trying to be optimistic”* and *“this is hard to think about. It is easier to think about challenges”* reflected this sentiment.

Strengthening Collaboration and Coordination

One of the most frequently mentioned opportunities was **collaboration between migrant organisations – leading to better coordination and support of a shared agenda**. A notable example of successful collaboration and good practice was the ‘People on the Move: Priorities – Connect – Recourse’ meeting co-organised by migrant and legal organisations with the UNHCR in September 2024. This event facilitated connections between migrant organisations and pro bono legal practitioners, leading to the identification of key joint priorities for collective action.

In addition to intra-sector collaboration, interviewees highlighted the growing engagement between migrant-focused organisations and “mainstream” civil society organisations. Examples included:

- Abahlali baseMjondolo joining a court case on Operation Dudula’s illegal conduct
- The Treatment Action Campaign passing a Congress resolution on health xenophobia.

These instances reflect an increasing recognition among broader civil society organisations that addressing migration issues is essential to fully understanding and tackling systemic inequalities. Interviewees emphasised the importance of **integrating migrant advocacy into larger social justice movements** to foster social cohesion. One interviewee noted a strategic political moment to *“build solidarity around social crisis rather than citizenship”* citing economic justice - regardless of nationality and citizenship - as a potential area for alliance building.

Political shifts and new opportunities

The ANC’s loss of its parliamentary majority in the 2024 elections was viewed as a key opportunity. With a more fragmented political landscape, **there is potential for diverse views and perspectives to gain traction in decision-making spaces**. It was also seen as a positive sign that parties with anti-migrant approaches – most notably Operation Dudula - did not attract substantial number of votes, although the new Patriotic Alliance won eight and ActionSA won six parliamentary seats respectively.

Interviewees were **cautiously optimistic about the new Minister of DHA**, Dr Leon Schreiber, and frequently used the word “*hope*” when discussing willingness to engage with the migrant sector. Positive indicators thus far include:

- An apparent concern over issues of citizenship and ID blocking,
- The extension of the Zimbabwean Exemption Permit early on in his new position.
- A potential political incentive and strategic value for the DA to “*show up the ANC*”, exposing “*serious vested interests*” within the DHA.

However, concerns remain about the government’s long-term stance on migration. At the same time as these positive moves, **deportations have increased** with the DHA reporting a threefold increase from May to Oct 2024.⁶ Additionally, in the 2024/2025 financial year, more than R73 million was spent on deportations – the highest amount in a decade.⁷

Leveraging social media for advocacy

A communications specialist highlighted shifts in social media platforms as a potential advocacy opportunity. For example, the movement away from Twitter (now X) to newer platforms such as Threads and Blue Sky present a window for civil society to shape the discourse, reach broader audiences and challenge misinformation while fostering inclusive digital spaces for advocacy.⁸

3.3 Vehicles for Advocacy

3.3.1 Strategic litigation

Interviewees were invited to describe strategies for advancing a migrant rights agenda. Many emphasised the critical role of **strategic litigation highlighting its successes in securing significant legal victories**. One interviewee noted that “*the best thing to keep hope alive is to keep winning in court*”, while another remarked that litigation has proven to be the most successful in changing government policies.

However, interviewees also acknowledged the limitations and risks associated with litigation. Key concerns included:

- **Implementation gaps**: while litigation achieved often bring good outcomes for migrant rights, implementation is inconsistent.
- **Government relationships and resistance**: litigation may create adversarial relationships with government officials, limiting opportunities for collaborative reform.
- **Public Perception**: one respondent noted that migrant-focused litigation can be misconstrued as prioritising non-citizens over South Africans and that the lawyers involved “*don’t care about South Africans*”.

⁶ Carien du Plessis, ‘Deportations from South Africa Set to Triple, Minister Says’, *The Africa Report*, 22 October 2024, <https://www.theafricareport.com/365464/deportations-from-south-africa-set-to-triple-minister-says/>.

⁷ Parliamentary Monitoring Group, ‘Question to the Minister of Home Affairs- NW2169’, accessed 19 February 2025, <https://pmg.org.za/committee-question/27870/>.

⁸ A. Tattersall “Decline of X is an opportunity to do social media differently – but combining ‘safe’ and ‘profitable’ will still be a challenge” *TheConversation* 15 Oct 2024.

- **Sustainability of Change:** legal victories, even when enforced, do not necessarily lead to sustainable change. Some interviewees suggested that social movements may be better positioned to drive sustained change by fostering public buy-in and political accountability.

3.3.2 Strategic Advocacy

Building Solidarity and Shifting Narratives

Strategic advocacy was also highlighted emphasising local community organising and collaboration across different groups. Respondents emphasised the need for a *“united solidarity-based approach”* that aims to improve services and protection for all, or for all vulnerable groups –rather than focusing solely on migrants. Several interviewees highlighted the importance of collaborating with trade unions and organising around broader working-class issues reinforcing earlier discussions about *“considering opportunities”* to expand collaborations beyond the migrant focus. Key areas of focus include:

- *The informal economy, precarious work and labour casualisation* – strengthening protections for those operating outside formal labour structures.
- *Worsening food insecurity:* recognising increasing starvation as a regional crisis
- *Sector capacity-building and government accountability:* strengthening advocacy and keeping government accountable.

Narrative Change as a Strategic Tool

An important component of strategic advocacy is narrative change around migration. A communications specialist emphasised the importance of *“developing a message that reaches outside audiences and that disrupts the social hierarchy”* while remaining sensitive to the *“politics of empathy and compassion”*. Key considerations include:

- **Fostering empathy, not sympathy:** shifting the focus from sympathy (i.e. migrants as victims) to empathy for “the Other.” This can highlight shared struggles to create common ground between South Africans and migrants.
- **Strategic framing of issues:** advocacy efforts should frame migration issues in a way that acknowledges how a particular problem also affects South Africans. This can reinforce the idea that solutions should address *“all of our problems”* not just those of migrants.
- **Challenging xenophobia from within:** South Africans must actively challenge xenophobic narratives, rather than leaving it to migrants to defend themselves.
- **Using tropes strategically:** while not always *“ideologically pure”* leveraging the imagery and narratives around the *“good migrant”* can be effective in dismantling stereotypes about *“bad migrants”* to shift public perceptions.
- **Sustained counter-narratives of hope and inclusion:** Advocacy must go beyond reactive responses to crises and work toward long-term, transformative storytelling.

Education and information-dissemination

The effectiveness of broad-based advocacy relies on education and accessible information -sharing, particularly at the community level and with policy-makers in government. Some interviewees expressed concerns that migrant organisations are not prioritising community education effectively and that more targeted engagement is needed, especially with those in positions of power.

3.4 Social Movements

3.4.1 Defining Movement-Building

Interviewees offered various perspectives on movement-building. The key themes that emerged were **consensus-building over key issues, inclusivity, joint decision-making, shared priorities, and a collective agenda**.

A researcher with extensive experience in social movements provided a concise definition: *“The pulling together of people with a common purpose, to bring about change, and whose format should be organic to its circumstances”*. Another interviewee emphasised the temporary nature of social movements, highlighting the need to set aside disagreements to focus on shared goals such as: *“the many things we don’t agree on to achieve a handful of things we do agree on.”* Additionally, an interviewee stressed the importance of in-person organising while strategically leveraging digital platforms to expand reach and engagement.

3.4.2 Characteristics of a Successful Movement

While interviewees recognised the importance of movement-building around migrant issues many expressed concerns over a narrow focus on migrant rights only. **A key challenge is the risk of “exceptionalising” migrant rights, which could make it difficult to build widespread support** – especially if the movement is perceived as being in opposition to South Africans’ human rights and socio-economic struggles.

One recommendation was to **anchor migrant rights within broader, widely supported causes**, such as socio-economic inequality, rather than framing them as a standalone issue. This approach would mean that migrant rights could “piggy-back” on larger movements that already have broad-based support.

Several interviewees stressed the need for a proactive and strategic approach to movement-building. One interviewee noted that the migrant sector has been *“on the backfoot since 2008”* reacting rather than being proactive. This need is even more critical given the growing influence of political forces on the right with conservative and repressive agendas.

The current landscape in South Africa

Overall, interviewees felt that **there is currently no social movement for migrant issues** in SA. Instead, there is a mix of campaigns, coalitions, and localised mobilisation around particular issues.

When asked for example of international migrant rights social movements, interviewees struggled to identify clear precedents. Some mentioned migrant domestic worker movements in Southeast Asia, and migrant organising in the post-World War II era in the UK.

Key Characteristics of a Successful Migrant Rights Movement

Despite these challenges, interviewees provided detailed descriptions of the characteristics of a successful migrant rights movement. They also confirmed that a movement on migrant issues is needed in South Africa. Recommended characteristics included:

- **Cooperation and Clear Objectives:** a unified movement shaped by unifying issues with well-defined goals
- **A Focused Agenda:** A single issue or a set of strategic priorities

- **A 'bottom-up approach' to decision-making:** Democratic decision-making that is inclusive and driven from the grass-roots.
- **Cross-cutting Alliances:** A national movement that includes diverse ethnicities, races and migration status or nationalities. Within this the importance of including South Africans and non-South Africans at the grassroots level can prevent division and conflict.
- **Engagement with Government:** Not just opposing the state but working both inside and outside government structures to create change.
- **Involvement of Key Sectors:** Strategic partnerships with faith-based organisations, trade unions and local government actors.
- **A regional focus:** linking migrant struggles to broader regional migration and socio-economic issues

3.4.3 Movement leadership

The question of who should lead a social movement elicited a range of responses. Many interviewees strongly **advocated for a migrant-led movement, emphasising the importance of lived experience in shaping the movement's priorities and strategies.** Some respondents provided specific recommendations, suggesting leadership should reflect a *"diversity of migrants"* including:

- Those from the top 15 migrant-sending countries
- Leadership from "the most vulnerable migrants"
- Inclusion of recent arrivals (*"those who have just arrived in SA"*.)

However, some interviewees acknowledged potential challenges with a migrant-led structure. A key concern was that, given widespread anti-foreigner sentiment in SA, **a movement led exclusively by migrants might struggle with gaining credibility and attracting a broad base of support.** It was noted that some organisations that have challenged repressive government actions targeting migrants have experienced virulent backlash.⁹

¹⁰ A communication specialist emphasised that leadership should be determined by effectiveness stating that this should be a *"person who is the most effective at persuading people"*.

IV. Conclusion

These findings highlight key strategic opportunities for advancing a migrant rights agenda in SA's current political climate. They underscore the need for proactive, forward-looking advocacy strategies and the exploration of new vehicles for engagement. The idea of building a social movement received strong support with interviewees offering many ideas of how this could be done. A recurrent theme was the importance of crafting new and popular narratives while acknowledging the potential barriers and hurdles in trying to shift public perceptions.

Notably, some interviewees expressed concerns over mobilising around a narrowly defined migrant rights agenda. **This highlights the need to rethink how migrant rights are framed, ensuring they are strategically articulated in ways that are affective, broadly appealing, and responsive to the realities of migration.** Overall,

⁹ Kimberly Mutandiro "Joburg Traders Fear for Their Future after Their Lawyers Get Death Threats" *GroundUp News*, 4 August 2022, <https://groundup.org.za/article/we-are-being-chased-away-by-the-very-same-person-who-is-collecting-rent-from-us-says-de-villiers-street-trader/>.

¹⁰ Jeanette Chabalala, 'Zimbabwean Exemption Permit: "Attempts to Intimidate and Harass Us Is Alarming and Scary" - HSF', *News24*, accessed 19 February 2025, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/zimbabwean-exemption-permit-attempts-to-intimate-and-harass-us-is-alarming-and-scary-hsf-20220617>.

the depth of thought and analysis of the interviewees regarding what works and what doesn't and how to strategically navigate the changing political landscape is encouraging.

African Centre for Migration & Society
School of Social Sciences
University of the Witwatersrand
P.O. Box 76, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel: +27 (0)11 717 4033 | Fax: +27 (0)11 717 4040
info@migration.org.za | www.migration.org.za