

“This fight is for all of us” - Movement Building for (Migrant) Rights in South Africa

Culmination
Research report

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
Key Findings.....	3
Recommendations:	4
List of Abbreviations:.....	8
List of Figures	8
1. INTRODUCTION	9
A note on terminology	10
Report Structure.....	11
2. METHODOLOGY	12
2.1 Research Approach.....	12
2.2 Analytical Framework.....	12
2.3 Limitations.....	13
3. SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT	14
3.1 Introduction: Why context matters	14
3.2 Socio-economic and political context	14
3.3 Policy shifts: From rights-based inclusion to securitised exclusion	18
3.4 State of the Migrant Rights Sector	22
4. MIGRANT RIGHTS IN POLICY AND PRACTICE	27
4.1 Introduction; From Constitutional Rights to Conditional Access.....	27
4.3 Access to Services: Rights on Paper, Barriers in Practice	28
4.4 From Exclusion to Rights-Based Mobilisation.....	29
5. MOVEMENT -BUILDING FOR MIGRANT RIGHTS IN SA	30
5.1 Introduction: from Fragmented Resistance to Collective Strategizing	31
5.2 The 'Migrant Sector' Ecosystem	31
5.3 Concepts of Migrant Rights and Movement-Building	35
5.4 Sector Strengths: Emerging foundations.....	38
5.5 Collaboration and Emerging Alliances.....	38
5.6 Regional and Transnational Solidarity	39
6. LEARNING FROM OTHERS: SOCIAL MOVEMENT CASE STUDIES	40
6.1 Case Study 1: The Sans Papiers Movement.....	41
6.2 Case Study 2: Black Alliance for Just Immigration	43
6.3 Case Study 3: The United Democratic Front under apartheid	45
6.4 Case Study 4: The Treatment Action Campaign	47
6.5 Case Study 5: Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia	49
7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MIGRANT RIGHTS MOVEMENT- BUILDING IN SA	51
REFERENCES	54

Executive Summary

South Africa’s migrant rights sector is navigating a period of intense pressure and political volatility. Rising inequality, austerity, and deteriorating public services intersect with securitised migration reforms and xenophobic populism, creating a hostile environment for migrants and those who support them. While constitutional guarantees remain strong on paper, bureaucratic barriers, vigilante mobilisation, and exclusionary policy shifts have weakened access to rights in practice and heightened the precarity of migrants and refugees. At the same time, many working class South African citizens experience similar hardships due to systemic failures. Their anger and frustration, shaped by declining services and deepening inequality, are often channelled into resentment towards migrants and the notion of “migrant rights”. This is further fuelled by political scapegoating and xenophobic populism. Against this background, civil society and allied organisations continue to challenge xenophobic narratives and defend the constitutional promise of equality for all.

This report is a culmination of a year-long Porticus-supported research project led by the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) to inform movement building strategies for migrant rights in South Africa. Drawing on policy analysis, organisational mapping, key informant interviews, and participatory workshops (2024–2025), the study examines how migrant groups, civil society organisations, and human rights advocates are responding to shrinking civic space, funding contraction, and rising hostility- and where opportunities for long-term organising lie. Platforms convened through ACMS and the Porticus-supported MOVE Programme have helped build shared analysis, identify emergent issues, and seed collaborative advocacy.



Key Findings

Socioeconomic and Political Context

The report shows how widening inequality, governance failures, austerity, and collapsing public services collapse create fertile ground for scapegoating of migrants and securitised migration reforms. Although migrants represent a small proportion of the population, political actors frequently portray them as drivers of unemployment, criminals or responsible for failing systems. Vigilante mobilisation – particularly by Operation Dudula – has capitalised on public frustration, targeting clinics, schools and community spaces. At the same time, policy shifts such as the White Paper on Citizenship and Immigration, the Border Management Authority and new local by-laws signal a decisive move from rights-based governance toward enforcement-led migration control. While civil society litigation remains a vital counterweight, the broader environment is increasingly hostile.

Migrant Rights in Policy and Practice

Despite constitutional guarantees, access to socio-economic rights is largely determined by documentation – now a central mechanism of exclusion, administrative barriers, corruption and Department of Home Affairs backlogs produce widespread “illegality”, exposing migrants to harassment, detention, and denial of services. In health and education, rights exist in law but are routinely undermined in practice by xenophobic behaviour, unlawful documentation demands, collapsing systems, and financial barriers. This widening gap between legal commitments and lived reality affects migrants and poor Black South Africans alike, creating a shared terrain of exclusion that offers meaningful opportunities for rights-base solidarity and collective mobilisation.

Movement-Building and migration in South Africa

An updated ecosystem analysis reveals a sector defined by resilience, community legitimacy, and significant litigation victories. However, it is also marked by fragmentation, uneven coordination, donor-driven agendas, and chronic burnout. Migrant-led organising is expanding, yet organisations often operate in silos, compete over limited resources, or struggle to translate advocacy into broader mobilisation. Popularist actors exercise disproportionate influence, while “neutral” or “indifferent” institutions – including labour, faith networks, and mainstream social justice actors – remain largely untapped allies. Still, cross-organisational collaborations, joint campaigns, and shared spaces for strategic planning show early foundations for a more unified movement. Sustained investment is needed to shift from reactive crisis response to proactive, broad-based collective action.

Lessons and Strategic Directs for Movement-Building

Drawing on South African and international movements – including Sans Papiers, United Democratic Front, Treatment Action Campaign and Kopanang Africa against Xenophobia - the case studies included in the report identify the core essential ingredients of effective movement-building. These include reframing migrant rights within broader struggles for social justice, linking crisis response to long-term reform, fostering co-leadership between migrants and South Africans, building alliances with labour, political actors, and regional bodies; and embedding political education and narrative framing into organising work. The case studies demonstrate that durable movements emerge not only from advocacy, but from disciplined coordination, shared values, strategic storytelling, and sustained organising infrastructure. The report concludes that a coordinated, inclusive migrant-rights movement is both possible and necessary- grounded in solidarity, care, shared purpose, and long-term investment.

Despite growing challenges, the research documents a sector that continues to show resilience, creativity and courage. Migrant-led organising is strengthening; new alliances are emerging; and strategic litigation remains a powerful tool to defend constitutional rights. Yet these gains remain fragile. Fragmentation, resource scarcity, and the constant demands for crisis responses continue to limit transformative potential. Moving forward will require flexible funding, strengthened collaboration, leadership development, and intentional infrastructure-building to support a movement capable of advancing migrant justice while reinforcing the democratic values that protect everyone living in South Africa.



Recommendations:

- **Reframe migrant rights as part of the broader struggle for social justice: “Freedom Charter 2.0”?**

Building a collective movement in South Africa’s divided communities is challenging, but migrant exclusion is inseparable from the country’s unfinished struggle against racial capitalism and structural inequality. The same divisive logics that once separated Africans, so-called “Coloureds” and Indians now pit poor Black South African citizens against African migrants. The framing and terminology of “migrant rights” was flagged as problematic and research respondents warned that it antagonises many. A social movement tackling these issues should thus emphasise how both South Africans and non-South Africans are harmed by state neglect and corruption, and frame migrant rights as part of shared struggles over housing, health care, jobs, policing, and service de-

livery. Thus positioning migrant justice within a broader struggle for the realisation of human rights ensures that migration is not treated as a competing issue but as integral to a collective vision of equality. A “Freedom Charter 2.0” could help anchor this inclusive moral framework.

- **Link every act of resistance to structural reform and accountability**

Moments of crisis- like xenophobic attacks or the introduction of restrictive policies- catalyse public attention and solidarity, but are typically short-lived. To sustain momentum, every act of resistance, including crisis responses, should fit and feed into a sustained campaign for structural reform. Clear pathways of accountability and specific, actionable demands that contribute towards an overarching strategic aim are key components here.

- **Harness the power of co-leadership of South Africans and migrants**

Creating broad-based, collective support requires individuals and structures that are capable of connecting migrant and South African constituencies. This way, the lived experience of migrants continues to shape agendas while harnessing the higher legitimacy and political leverage of a wider reach across communities. Safeguards such as transparent decision-making, rotational or hybrid leadership models and equitable resourcing could prevent power imbalances.

- **Build alliances with organised labour**

Migrant and citizen workers share grievances about low wages, corruption, and mismanagement. Unions- particularly in health, education, and municipal sectors- are critical yet currently peripheral allies. Reviving the tradition of labour-based solidarity central to South Africa’s democratic history, joint campaigns could help to reframe service failures as governance issues rather than caused by the “burden” of migration. Public service unions may not be interested in advancing migrant rights per se, but they also want public institutions to be well-managed and sufficiently resourced. If channelled strategically, this provides an opportunity to create common ground.

- **Build alliances with political partners at all levels**

Both the Economic Freedom Fighters and the Democratic Alliance have publicly condemned vigilantism and xenophobia. Their positions show that opposition to xenophobic mobilisation can cross party lines, creating openings for strategic engagement on migrant rights within legislative and policy arenas. The Member of the Mayoral Committee for Health in Tshwane from the Economic Freedom Fighters has spoken out in support of the court ruling against Dudula’s interference in public health facilities (1), underscoring that access to health care- regardless of nationality or documentation- is a constitutional obligation. These examples suggest that there are potential allies at multiple levels of governance who could become allies in the broader struggle for equality, dignity, and protection of migrant rights.

- **Invest in regional and continental cooperation**

Regional collaboration is essential to counter the perception that migrants are a “burden” on SA’s public systems. Cost-sharing and reciprocity agreements within SADC would recognise the realities of regional mobility, acknowledge mutual benefits, and could help depoliticise debates on service access. Beyond financial cooperation, deeper engagement with regional networks across SADC and the African Union could strengthen advoca-

cacy by shared legal databases, monitoring frameworks, and policy platforms that build a united Pan-African front against xenophobia, exclusion, and securitisation. Aligning national struggles with continental human rights mechanisms also offers South African movements additional jurisprudence, solidarity, and institutional leverage. In this way, the struggle for migrant rights becomes part of a broader African project to affirm mobility, equality, and social justice.

- **Centre collective care**

Human rights activists in South Africa work under constant pressure and hostility, and many activists' face harassment, exhaustion, and emotional strain. For those who are migrants themselves, the pressures of organising are compounded by their own precarious status. Those who live with insecure documentation or daily discrimination face heightened risks of harassment, detention, or deportation while also carrying the emotional weight of their communities' struggles.

To be sustainable, movements need to make collective care a core part of their organising. This means building cultures that prioritise rest, safety, and mutual support, and that share responsibility rather than relying on a few individuals to carry the burden. It also means setting up practical forms of protection- legal assistance, advice, peer and solidarity networks, and spaces for recovery and debriefing- so that activists are not left isolated.

- **Provide accessible political education**

Political education has been central to the struggles against colonialism and apartheid. Across Africa, movements employed popular education programmes to cultivate political awareness, unity, and courage among ordinary people. As Nyabola writes, without political education, "our activism remains reactionary, not radical" (2). For her, this means "thinking beyond the crisis of the moment towards the kind of future we want to have" (2).



"What we found again and again and again is South Africans ... who simply do not have a grasp of what migration actually means and the history and the context of migration, why people migrate. And once the people are exposed to those arguments and those realities [...] It is amazing how people's perspectives begin to shift and change."

(Interview, Political Activist, December 2024).

- **Build relationships with public officials**

Constructive engagement with municipal officials and key government departments - such as Health, Home Affairs, Education, SAPS and Social Development - can strengthen accountability while building mutual trust. When movements assist officials in understanding legal obligations, improving service delivery systems, or mediating community tensions, this cooperative approach could turn adversarial relationships into partnerships rooted in shared problem-solving and respect for rights. By positioning themselves as allies who are supportive but remain critical in governance rather than outsiders, migrant rights actors could contribute to more responsive and inclusive local administrations.

A coordinated, inclusive movement for migrant justice is both possible and necessary- not only to protect migrants, but to defend constitutional values and advance dignity and rights for all who live in the country. With strategic collaboration and sustained support, the foundations that are already emerging could evolve into durable movement infrastructure capable of shaping policy, public discourse, and democratic futures firmly anchored in human rights principles. As one research respondent reminded: *“The fight is for all of us”*.

List of Abbreviations:

ACMS:	African Centre for Migration and Society
AfriSoc:	African Solidarity Campaign
BAJI:	The Black Alliance for Just Immigration
CoRMSA:	Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa
DoH:	Department of Health
DHA:	Department of Home Affairs
EFF:	Economic Freedom Fighters
KAAX:	Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia
LHR:	Lawyers for Human Rights
PEPFAR:	President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
RRO:	Refugee Reception Office
SA:	South Africa
SADC:	Southern African Development Community
SAHRC:	South African Human Rights Commission
SERI:	Socio-economic Rights Institute
TAC:	Treatment Action Campaign
UDF:	United Democratic Front
UHC:	Universal Health Coverage
USA:	United States of America

List of Figures

Text Box 1:	Civil society litigation victories on health xenophobia p.17.
Text Box 2:	Social Movements and their importance p.30.
Table 1:	Legislative and Policy Regression in SA's Migration Governance p.19.
Figure 1:	South African Migration and Health Care Timeline (1994 – 2025) p.21.
Figure 2:	Migrant sector Ecosystem 2025 p.33.

List of Images

Image 1:	South African History Archive https://www.saha.org.za/udf/udf_unites_apartheid_divides_udf_united_democratic_front_forward_to_peoples_power.htm . p.45
Image 2:	TAC Poster for Civil Disobedience Campaign in 2003 https://mulpress.mcmaster.ca/globallabour/article/view/2366/2485 p. 47
Image 3:	TAC T-Shirts https://www.tac.org.za/timeline/ p.47
Image 4:	KAAX https://kaax.org.za/about-us/ pg.50

1. Introduction

South Africa (SA)'s constitutional commitment to equality and dignity stands in stark contrast to exclusionary practices and rising anti-migrant sentiment. Administrative barriers, fragmented governance, and securitised migration policies have eroded access to rights and services for many migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. Since 2022, vigilante mobilisation targeting migrants has increasingly entered public institutions such as clinics, hospitals and schools. At the same time, government officials issue statements, restrictive directives and policy proposals to curb the rights of 'illegal' migrants. To vigilante actors, this signals that their actions are justified, and lends legitimacy to their claims. In this ongoing feedback loop, popular xenophobic mobilisation and state policy discourses validate each other and normalise the policing of migrants within everyday institutions. Such dynamics are not limited to SA – they reflect broader global trends in which migration is politicised and social protection systems for migrants are eroded (3).

This report emerges at a time when the civic landscape in SA is also shifting. Donor funding contraction, heightened scrutiny of NGOs, and the termination of major health funding streams in early 2025 have intensified pressure on civil society (4,5). Civic space is shrinking- it's becoming harder and riskier for civil-society organisations to speak, mobilise, and demand accountability. Organisations that once focused primarily on legal advocacy and service delivery now face growing and different demands, all amidst diminishing resources and shrinking civic space. As a result, these organisations are compelled to consider new and innovative strategies for sustaining rights protection and collective action in an increasingly hostile environment.

Against this backdrop, this report assesses the viability of building and sustaining a social movement for migrant rights in South Africa. It forms the culmination of a research initiative by the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) in 2024-2025, supported by funding from Porticus, to strengthen strategic engagement and to explore pathways for coordinated, long-term advocacy. The project examined how migrant groups, community-based organisations and NGOs are responding to changing political and funding conditions, and to identify where opportunities exist to deepen solidarity, challenge harmful narratives, and expand influence.

Drawing on formal interviews and follow-up correspondence with 20 individuals, three deliberation workshops, a desktop review, policy analysis and ecosystem mapping conducted between 2024 and 2025, the report explores both the external environment and internal dynamics shaping the migrant ecosystem in SA. It considers the enabling conditions and constraints for collective organising; the relationships, capacities, and gaps across actors; and lessons that could be drawn from other social movements in South Africa and globally.



At its core, the report argues that movement-building for migrant rights is both necessary and possible. It requires deliberate investment in building consensus, relationships and solidarity beyond a narrow focus on the concerns of migrants or “migrant rights”. This requires nurturing leadership that can bridge communities and foster shared purpose, strategic narrative framing, and institutional infrastructure, while guarding against internal fragmentation and conflict. The report identifies emerging foundations for collective action, alongside the strategic priorities needed to shift the migrant sector from reactive and fragmented responses to proactive, coordinated, and broad-based mobilisation. In doing so, the report situates migrant justice firmly within wider struggles for social and economic equality for all in SA, and offers recommendations for building a more connected, confident, creative and resilient movement over time.



A note on terminology

Rather than describing neutral or objective realities, categories such as ‘economic migrant’ and ‘asylum seeker’ are political instruments used by states and international agencies to manage mobility, distribute rights, and control access to protection. Some authors argue that differentiating between ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ migration serves to draw moral boundaries- defining who is ‘deserving’ of refuge and who may be excluded.(6) For these reasons, we understand the below terms as political rather than objective, descriptive categories.

Asylum seeker

An individual seeking international protection. In countries with individualised procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Not every asylum seeker would ultimately be recognised as a refugee, but every recognised refugee was initially an asylum seeker (7).

Refugee

Any person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country” (Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention) (7).

Migrant

An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding as being anyone who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. In everyday conversation in SA, ‘migrant’ usually refers to international migrants.

Undocumented Migrant

The label ‘undocumented migrant’ is often used as a seemingly factual description - someone without the proper papers - but states use this category to criminalise mobility and legitimise exclusion. Such labelling transforms the absence of documents into an absence of rights and conceals that a lack of documentation is often produced by the state itself through restrictive visa systems, shifting asylum rules, and bureaucratic barriers that hinder access to legal migration routes. Once people are categorised as ‘undocumented’, they are rendered visible to systems of policing and deportation but invisible to systems of protection (3,8).

Migrant Justice

Migrant justice is the movement towards fair treatment, rights, and access to justice for migrants, ensuring they are treated with dignity and are not exploited (9).



Report Structure

SECTION 1 introduces the purpose and scope of the research, situating the work within current political and institutional shifts in SA.

SECTION 2 outlines the methodology, including key informant interviews, participatory workshops, policy analysis, and organisational mapping.

SECTION 3 examines the socio-economic and political context shaping migrant rights, tracing the evolution from rights-based commitments to increasingly securitised policies and practices.

SECTION 4 analyses access to rights and services in practice, with a focus on documentation, bureaucratic barriers, and everyday exclusion.

SECTION 5 assesses the migrant rights sector, drawing on interview and workshop insights to explore strengths, challenges, emerging leadership, collaboration patterns, and opportunities for movement-building. It also identifies external threats and funding pressures confronting civil-society actors.

SECTION 6 turns to lessons from comparative social movements in SA and globally, distilling strategies for leadership development, alliance-building, and long-term mobilisation. The report concludes by outlining strategic priorities for building and strengthening a coordinated, resilient, and rights-affirming movement for migrant justice in SA.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Approach

The report draws on a mixed qualitative approach combining desktop review, policy analysis, organisational mapping, civil society deliberations and 20 key informant interviews conducted between December 2024 and November 2025. The methodology was designed to capture both the internal organisational dynamics and external systemic factors influencing migrant rights advocacy. The interviews included representatives of migrant-led organisations, mainstream advocacy networks, civil society actors, and service providers engaged in migration, health, and human rights across SA. All interviewees signed consent forms and agreed to be quoted anonymously. The Wits University Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) granted ethical clearance (protocol number H24/09/29).

The research focused on understanding how organisations position themselves within broader migrant rights ecosystems, how they collaborate or compete for resources, and how they adapt to political and funding volatility. The intent was not only to generate recommendations, but to facilitate a collective process of reflection among organisations and networks working in the field of migrant rights and social justice. The analysis also incorporates findings from three participatory workshops convened under the Porticus-supported “Strengthening Strategic Engagement and Movement Building for Migrant Rights in South & Southern Africa” initiative. These deliberation workshops provided an opportunity for discussion and to test preliminary research findings, explore shared challenges, and identify potential strategies for building cross-organisational collaboration and solidarity.

Documentary analysis was conducted across national legislation, policy frameworks, and institutional communications from 2023–2025, including recent developments such as the White Paper on Citizenship and Immigration (2024), the Immigration Amendment Bill (2025), and key sectoral policies on health and education. This was complemented by a review of secondary literature and media reporting.

2.2 Analytical Framework

The analysis was grounded in a movement-ecology framework, recognising that migrant rights mobilisation depends not only on resistance or advocacy, but on interconnected systems of action across migrant-led collectives, NGOs, service providers, faith networks, and research organisations. This approach examined how policy work, narrative change, service delivery, and solidarity efforts interact, and where fragmentation, duplication, or missed opportunities for shared strategy limit collective impact. Interview data was analysed thematically, allowing patterns, tensions, and recurring ideas to emerge inductively. These highlighted common challenges related to power, legitimacy, leadership, funding, and sustainability, alongside the structural and political constraints shaping organisational practice.

The analysis was also informed by rights-based and intersectional frameworks, situating migrant justice within broader struggles for racial, gendered, economic, and health equity. Migration was therefore understood not in isolation, but in relation to other axes of inequality and exclusion. To assess the viability of movement-building in the current context, the study drew on core concepts from social-movement theory, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how collective power emerges- not only through advocacy and resources, but through relationships, shared purpose, and solidarity over time.

2.3 Limitations

The assessment took place during a period of significant flux and turbulence in SA - marked by tightening migration policies, economic uncertainty, and the increasing normalisation of anti-migrant sentiments across public and political discourse. While urgent matters demanded civil society attention, 20 people were willing to put aside time for research interviews and follow-up questions, while between 40-50 people attended the three deliberation workshops to engage with emerging research findings. A sizeable number of invitations for interviews went unanswered. This limited the research project's ability to reflect more comprehensively on current movement-building activities in process already. It also meant a relatively limited primary data sample size, mainly drawn from more established NGOs and active actors in the migrant sector.

Other limitations of the study include concentration in urban centres- notably Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban where the majority of migrant rights organisations are situated- and a focus on actors already engaged in rights-based advocacy. While not representative of all migrant communities or service providers, the findings nonetheless offer important insight into the sector's strategic orientations, constraints, and emerging opportunities for collective action.

3. Socioeconomic and Political Context

3.1 Introduction: Why context matters

Understanding the broader socio-political and economic context is essential to assessing the viability of movement-building for migrant rights in SA. Social movements are shaped not only by organisational capacity and vision, but by the wider environment in which they operate, including political opportunity structures, public sentiment, civic space, and the institutional architecture of rights delivery.

In SA, progressive constitutional guarantees exist alongside deepening inequality, governance failures, securitised migration management, shrinking donor support, and heightened social insecurity. These forces both constrain- but importantly also create- strategic opportunities for mobilisation, shaping the terrain on which migrant-rights actors operate and organise.

3.2 Socio-economic and political context

SA continues to grapple with rising unemployment and inequality. Migrants experience the similar deprivation as working-class South Africans, but face additional challenges. The following outlines the key elements of this context.

Migration patterns and demographics

SA hosts Africa's largest international migrant population, predominantly from countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (10,11). According to 2025 mid-year estimates, approximately 2.4 million international migrants- 3.9% of the population – reside in SA, a slight decline from 4.2% in 2011 (12).

Migration is deeply embedded in the social and economic fabric of SA, with internal migration at a far greater in scale - millions of South Africans continue to move from rural to urban areas. Gauteng hosts 50.2% of all foreign-born residents, followed by the Western Cape 15.6% (12).



Historical legacies and persistent inequalities

The political contestation over migration in SA is inseparable from the country's history. Colonialism and apartheid privileged white populations and dispossessed Black South Africans of land and access to education, health care, housing, and infrastructure (13). Although the democratic transition enshrined socio-economic rights for 'everyone' under the Constitution and Bill of Rights, subsequent policy shifts diluted many of these redistributive ambitions (14) The move from the Reconstruction and Development Programme in 1996 to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy marked a retreat from the liberation movement's equality agenda (15).

The cumulative impact of this remains profound. The wealthiest 10% - predominantly white- control about 86% of national wealth (16). Millions of working-class Black South Africans continue to face poverty, housing shortages, collapsing infrastructure, and high crime (17,18). Household income disparities are stark: in 2022/23, average annual income for white-headed households was R676,375, nearly five times that of Black

African-headed households (R143,632) and three times higher than so-called “Coloured”-headed households (R260,816) (19). In 2025, unemployment stood at 31.9%. Young people have the highest unemployment rates: for those between 15-24 years, it is 58.5 %, for those between 25-34 years it is 38,4%. In addition 33,9% of young people between 15-24 years were not in ‘employment, education or training’ (20).

The Covid-19 pandemic further deepened inequalities with lockdowns creating immense hardship for informal workers and low-income households (21,22).

Public service collapse, funding constraints and resentment

Decades of corruption, mismanagement, austerity and ‘state capture’ have left SA’s public services in crisis and eroded public trust. Successive Commissions of inquiry and investigative journalism exposures have uncovered entrenched misconduct, corruption and a lack of accountability across many government structures (23). A considerable share of allocated health funds is illicitly redirected for individual gain rather than service delivery. The most recent example is the case of the Tembisa hospital in Gauteng. In September 2025, South Africa’s Special Investigative Unit released an interim report that showed that three syndicates had stolen at least R2 billion from the hospital (24).

Health, education, housing, and basic infrastructure suffer from chronic underfunding, weak governance, and corruption- particularly in those provinces that have historically been the most disadvantaged. For many South African citizens, this translates into collapsing hospitals and schools, unsafe sanitation, overcrowded housing, and dysfunctional local government (25–27). While cutting budgets, the demand for public health care has not diminished, meaning that ‘patients will spend more time on trolleys or floors in the emergency centre and may not be admitted’ (28).

Migrants- particularly those from the African continent- experience the similar systemic deprivation as working-class South Africans yet face additional barriers linked to documentation, xenophobic scapegoating, and heightened exclusion from public services (3,29–31). During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, migrants were initially excluded from the government’s Social Relief of Distress Grant; only following court action were asylum seekers and certain permit holders allowed to apply (32).

The recent withdrawal of USAID and U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) funding by the Trump administration intensified fragility (33). In early 2025, support to around 40 health projects- many serving Key Populations- was abruptly terminated (34). SA’s previous gains in HIV and TB are now precarious, particularly for Key Populations and migrant communities who had depended on donor-funded, non-discriminatory spaces of care (34). Over 8 000 PEPFAR-funded staff were retrenched, disrupting HIV testing, prevention, and treatment. Community-based initiatives providing food support, gender-based violence services, and HIV prevention were forced to close (4,35,36). The cutbacks of these vital parallel systems pushed thousands of citizens and migrants into an already fragile public sector, intensifying a sense of competition for scarce resources and increasing anger and resentment. This has been further fuelled by populist groups who construct migrants as the cause of the system’s strain.

Political competition, populism and vigilante xenophobia



Migration has become a potent political tool to deflect from governance failures, corruption, and the ongoing crisis of service delivery. Migrants are framed as threats to national stability or as competitors for scarce jobs and housing- narratives that legitimise and normalise exclusion and fuel violence.

A highly circulated video exemplifies this trend: in 2022, Limpopo MEC for Health Phophi Ramathuba (now Premier of the province) publicly berated a Zimbabwean patient lying in a hospital bed, blaming foreigners for the province's health crisis- despite official data showing that migrants constitute only 2.6% of Limpopo's population (37, 38). This episode occurred shortly after Ramathuba's office was investigated over a R125m Personal Protective Equipment corruption scandal (23) suggesting a diversionary motive on the MEC's part. More recently, with rhetoric reminiscent of apartheid-era urban control measures (39), Gauteng Premier Panyaza Lesufi framed informal settlements as "criminal" spaces dominated by undocumented migrants, threatening "unprecedented" mass evictions (40). Such narratives persist despite evidence to the contrary. Official data shows that 81% of shack dwellers in Gauteng are South African born, with most others documented (41).

Yet misinformation remains widespread and bolsters anti-foreigner sentiment: a 2020 survey found that 57% of South Africans hold negative views toward refugees and migrants, with discrimination common in schools, workplaces, and healthcare facilities (42). Meanwhile a GovDem Poll found that 73.2% of the 3000 respondents surveyed in SA in 2025 do not trust immigrants from Africa "at all" or "not very much" (43). In 2022, UN Special Rapporteurs warned that unchecked migrant scapegoating could provoke "explosive violence" (44).

In the run up to the 2024 elections, anti-migrant rhetoric was a key political strategy. Populist parties like the Patriotic Alliance weaponised xenophobia to mobilise voters (45–47). Populist organisations such as Operation Dudula and March and March have garnered a lot of attention by scapegoating migrants for unemployment, crime, and the decline of public services. Exploiting widespread frustration, these groups have physically blocked migrants from accessing clinics and schools, harassed individuals in public spaces, and targeted civil society organisations that defend migrant rights (48–50).

Some senior government officials have echoed or legitimised xenophobic claims. Sports, Arts and Culture Minister Gayton McKenzie frequently urges the removal of "illegal foreigners". Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi and parliamentary chair Sibongiseni Dhlomo criticised actions by vigilante groups barring people without South African identity documents from access public services but endorsed their grievances. In August 2025, ActionSA MP Kgosi Letlape - previously head of the South African Medical Association as well as the Health Professions Council of South Africa - stated that excluding migrants from health care was necessary for the system to "cope" (51–53).

Problematically, leaders denounce attacks but echo claims that migrants "overburden services." This normalises xenophobic narratives in policy, emboldens vigilante actors who see their views reflected in official rhetoric, and intensifies public hostility creating a cycle in which populism shapes policy and policy, in turn, legitimises populism (54).

However, it is important to note that some politicians and government departments have condemned intimidation and reaffirmed guarantees including that "everyone" has the right to access healthcare (55). Significantly, in July 2025, President Ramaphosa cautioned that "one of the most dangerous narratives today is the weaponization of migration" calling for "people-centered regional migration policies that affirm dignity, rights, and solidarity" (56) The Chairperson of the Select Committee on Education, Sciences and Creative Industries for example stated:



“The actions of Operation Dudula are objectionable and are an unnecessary distraction to the work government is doing around immigration challenges. People do not just come to SA out of free will but for refuge and from hunger.” (57)

Textbox 1: Civil society litigation victories on health xenophobia

Preventing migrants from accessing health care has a long history in SA, and academic articles and reports started documenting health xenophobia from the early 2000s onwards (30,58). Various civil society organisations and health care worker groups challenged such exclusions through petitions, establishing migrant health forums, setting up migrant clinics, engaging directly with clinics, hospitals and various departments of health and eventually challenging these practices through court action (59).

In 2022, SECTION27 – a human rights NGO- filed court papers against the MEC of Health in Gauteng following hospitals and clinics in Gauteng denying health care services to pregnant and lactating women, and children under the age of 6 years. In the case *SECTION27 and others vs MEC of Health, Gauteng and others* (case no 19304/2022), the court overturned health policies that restricted pregnant and lactating women, and children under the age of 6 years from accessing free health care based on nationality and documentation status as these were in conflict with the Constitution and the National Health Act. The court innovatively ordered the Department to ensure that this was communicated to all patients and to display posters containing such information in all public health facilities nation-wide (60).

Anti-migrant vigilante group Operation Dudula (meaning ‘force out’ in isiZulu) was established in Soweto in 2021 and spread to other provinces. It uses aggression, violence and threats against migrants. In 2022, Operation Dudula started intimidating patients in front of hospitals and clinics demanding that they present their South African IDs to them and turning those away who were unable to produce such documentation. In 2023, Kopanang Africa against Xenophobia and three other organisations challenged Operation Dudula’s vigilante activities in the Gauteng High Court (61). **The judgement given in November 2025 strongly pushed back against vigilantism and is lauded as a victory for anti-xenophobia efforts. The judge interdicted Operation Dudula from barring people from access health and education, clarified that only immigration officers or police are allowed to demand identity documents to demonstrate the right to be in SA, and directed the South African government to implement the ‘National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance’ (62,63).** Recent reports show that Operation Dudula continue to defy the court order and are still blocking access to health facilities (64).



3.3 Policy shifts: From rights-based inclusion to securitised exclusion



The convergence of spending cuts, service delivery failures, securitised reforms, and rising xenophobia exposes a central contradiction: **SA's constitutional promise of universality coexists with administrative practices that render rights conditional, precarious, and unevenly applied** (3). As under apartheid-era pass laws, today's bureaucratic barriers push people into "illegality", criminalise mobility, and implement unlawful exclusion through everyday governance (65–67).

The 1996 Constitution established extensive socio-economic rights for "everyone", and the Refugees Act of 1998 was widely lauded as a continental model aligned with international refugee law. SA was also the first African country to recognise sexual orientation as a basis for asylum (69,70). However, some of these progressive foundations have steadily eroded.

Recent reforms, including the proposed White Paper on Citizenship and Immigration (2024) and the Immigration Amendment Bill (2025), have tightened asylum procedures, expanded enforcement powers, and increased the threat of accelerated deportation (71). With very few legal pathways for low-skilled or informal workers, the asylum system has become the only viable entry channel for many migrants, overwhelming administrative capacity and fuelling political claims of "abuse" of asylum by economic migrants (72,73).

SA's shift towards securitised migration governance mirrors broader global trends seen in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America (USA). The new Minister of Home Affairs in the Government of National Unity, Dr Leon Schreiber, has pledged to modernise the Department of Home Affairs (DHA). However, in a symbolically powerful move, his flagship initiative Operation New Broom was launched in Cape Town's District Six¹ in 2025, framing migrants as "illegals" occupying land meant for restitution (75).



Policy initiatives such as the "National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance" (2019) and the Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill (2018) were intended to reaffirm Constitutional commitments to equality and dignity. Yet, the former remains weakly implemented, and the latter has still not been enacted (76,77). Similarly, the National Health Insurance Act (2023)- ostensibly a step towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC)- entrenches exclusion by adding significant restrictions to migrants' access to healthcare, limiting this to emergencies and notifiable conditions of public health concern only. (78,79). Such provisions undermine both SA's UHC ambitions and broader public health goals. They are also very likely to be challenged on constitutional grounds (80,81).

At municipal level, restrictive by-laws and permit systems - such as those targeting informal traders - are often enforced selectively against migrant communities (82,83). This reflects a broader trend of "administrative bordering", where bureaucratic discretion and everyday governance supplement legal reform as mechanisms of exclusion. There is also a risk that the General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill (2024) and a proposed "foreign agents" law could enable surveillance of NGOs receiving foreign funding and threaten independent advocacy. Coupled with funding contraction, these developments create political and financial pressure on rights-based organisations.


Table 1 below highlights some of the key policies and laws that illustrate SA's shift from rights-based to more securitised migration governance.

¹ From 1966 onward, apartheid authorities declared District Six a 'whites-only' area under the Group Areas Act and forcibly removed over 60 000 residents from their homes. Families were displaced to the Cape Flats, their houses bulldozed, and their multicultural community destroyed. This history remains painful for former residents and their descendants as they continue to wait for restitution and return (74).

Table 1: Legislative and Policy Regression in SA’s Migration Governance

POLICY / LEGISLATION	KEY REGRESSIVE PROVISIONS
National Law	
 Border Management Authority (BMA) Act (2020, operationalised 2023) ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishes a centralised border security agency with expanded surveillance powers, including drones and biometric monitoring. Institutionalises border militarisation, framing migration as a threat to sovereignty, and eroding the humanitarian character of asylum protection.
Provincial Law	
 Gauteng Township Economic Development Act (2022) and CoGTA Standard By-Law for Township Economies (2024) ³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reserves informal economy sectors (e.g., spaza shops, car repairs) for citizens and permanent residents. Authorises municipalities to impose quotas on foreign-owned businesses, legitimising economic exclusion and contravening equality guarantees.
Policy	
 National Labour Migration Policy (2021–2024) ⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduces quotas limiting international migrants in certain sectors, effectively restricting labour market access. Reinforces narratives of migrants as competitors and legitimises exclusion in the name of protecting local employment.
Draft Laws	
 Immigration Amendment Bill (2025) ⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Caps immigration detention at 30 days and mandates court appearance within 48 hours- nominally protective but may enable fast-tracked deportation and reduced due process. Reflects a shift toward enforcement and deportation rather than inclusion and protection.
 General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill (2024) and “Foreign Agents” Bill (2024) ⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Would permit state vetting and surveillance of NGOs receiving foreign funding under broad definitions of “national security”. Potentially threatens the freedom of association, civic autonomy, and independent advocacy on migrant and human rights issues.
Policy Guide	
 White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection (2024) ⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposes SA’s withdrawal from the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, with re-accession under reservations limiting refugees’ socioeconomic rights. Recommends amendments to the Citizenship, Immigration and Refugees Act to narrow eligibility and expand exclusion. If implemented, this marks a decisive shift from rights-based to securitised migration governance, undermining constitutional and international commitments.

 Significant regression - undermines rights-based frameworks

 Moderate regression - restrictive or exclusionary implications

² Border Management Authority (BMA) Act (2020), operationalised 2023

³ Gauteng Township Economic Development Act (2022) and CoGTA Standard By-Law for Township Economies (2024) (82)

⁴ National Labour Migration Policy (2021–2024) (85)

⁵ Immigration Amendment Bill (2025) (86)

⁶ General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill (2024) and “Foreign Agents” Bill (2024)(87)

⁷ White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection (2024) (71)

Together, these dynamics mark a coordinated shift from constitutional promises of universality toward a security-oriented migration regime that constrains protection, deepens precarity, and undermines efforts to build a movement grounded in dignity, equality, and human rights. This is also illustrated in Figure 1 (below), which highlights the shift in selected migration and health policies in SA from 1994 to the present (54).

Against this backdrop, the following Section examines how documentation functions as a mechanism of bordering and exclusion - and why reclaiming it as a site of struggle is central to migrant-led mobilisation and rights-based movement-building.

South African Migration and Healthcare Policy Timeline (1994-2025)

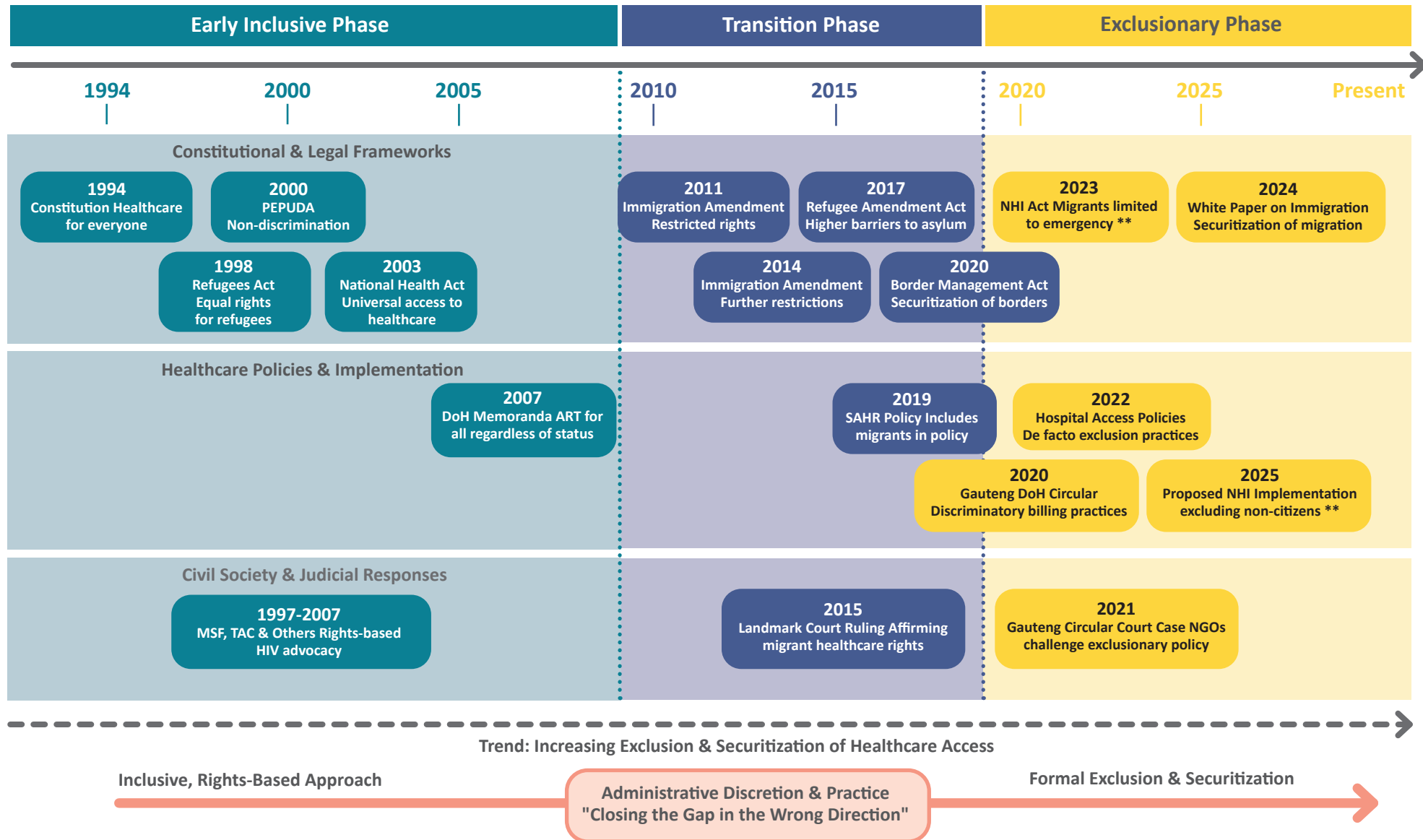


Figure 1: South African Migration and Health Policy Timeline 1994-2025 (54) ** Note: The National Health Insurance has undergone several reforms and as of May 15, 2024, was signed into law and was gazetted as the NHI Act by President Cyril Ramaphosa (78).

3.4 State of the Migrant Rights Sector

Given the context outlined above, migrant-rights mobilisation is not only urgent, but essential. As state protections weaken and constitutional guarantees are undermined in practice, civil society remains the frontline defence of dignity, access, and justice.



Despite adversity, the migrant sector in SA continues to demonstrate tenacity and commitment. It comprises established legal advocacy organisations, humanitarian networks, grassroots community structures, faith actors, and a growing number of migrant- and refugee-led groups. These actors work across litigation, case support, direct service provision, mutual aid, community organising, and policy advocacy. Collectively, these actors hold the knowledge, moral authority, and strategic potential- especially if built around a common agenda- to build a more inclusive and rights-affirming society.

Footprint

During interviews, respondents were asked to comment on the size of the migrant sector. 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 - a number of different groups or 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. Some felt that some migrant rights organisations (mainly focused on legal responses and education) have transitioned into migrant service organisations (providing direct social services).

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 and migrant leadership within the migration sector allowing for more direct representation and advocacy as migrants can “*speak with their own voices*”.



Some interviewees pointed to the sector’s continued faith in the SA Constitution and the lasting impact of litigation. Others noted that there was more consolidation within the sector as organisations become better connected, more professional and sophisticated in their activities.

Coalitions such as Kopanang Africa against Xenophobia (KAAX) (See Section 6.5) and the “Durban Coalition”⁸ were credited with being able to mobilise collectively and intervene in public and political spaces. Strengthened collaboration between researchers and civil society has also supported more coordinated advocacy and deeper analysis.

⁸ ‘The Durban Coalition is a collective of NGOs, CBOs, university academics, social movements as well as rate payers and residents associations in eThekweni.

Weaknesses



Interviewees 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 South Africans, as opposed to a narrow focus issues experienced by a sub-group of migrants. Other interviewees listed ongoing, strategic engagement with the media and effective challenging of harmful narratives as critical gaps. A seasoned migrant service-provider advised:



“We don’t have [media] savviness in the sector [...] We don’t call out [politicians], we don’t prepare for media interviews [...] and call them out and proactively say ‘Guys, you are misinforming’ [...] We are always coming out like we being too defensive or we’re being too arrogant around certain issues. If this movement happens, there has to be a lot of resources pushed into [media] training. People need to engage constructively with the media and to push out the messaging that is more positive.”

Fragmentation and Funding Pressures



Funding emerged as a key challenge during interviews and workshops. **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, financial and reporting requirements for NGOs create barriers for organisations lacking financial and management expertise. Funders and practitioners alike emphasised that smaller or emerging migrant-led initiatives struggle with compliance and administrative requirements which limits their access to funding and advocacy platforms. Conversely, formally registered NGOs have stronger advocacy influence, which likely places them in a better position to raise funds. Participants called for more flexible, equity-based funding mechanisms that incentivise collaboration and shared achievements.

An advocacy expert highlighted how funders may contribute to division within the sector:

“

“Funders began to drive the process of movement building and the words social justice and social change became buzz words. Funders also began pushing for refugee led initiatives - and funding being prescriptive. So you have political mobilisation based on identity politics.”

In SA and elsewhere, public discourse, policy and law construct a moral hierarchy between refugees and undocumented migrants. Refugees are at times portrayed as legitimate victims who have followed the rules and have been vetted by the government, undocumented migrants are cast as opportunists who deliberately flout the law. Reinforced by state rhetoric and administrative categories, this distinction between the two types of migrants reproduces hierarchies that mirror apartheid’s graded citizenship, where minor privileges were given to so-called “Coloured” and Indian South Africans to prevent unity amongst the oppressed. Today, similar tactics operate between refugees and other migrants, as well as between migrants and South Africans. **These distinctions obscure their shared experience of exclusion, precarity, and state neglect, ensuring that those who should be natural allies in demanding equality are instead positioned against one another.**



The withdrawal of key donor funding including from the USA, and rising service needs, has driven organisations into continuous crisis response. Funding scarcity and unpredictability remains a critical challenge, with one respondent stating: *“We are desperate for funding. And we need it yesterday.”* Short project cycles, restrictive donor frameworks, and limited access to resources reinforce sector fragmentation and constrain transformative organising. This could privilege service delivery and documentation assistance over strategizing, leadership development and movement sustainability. Participants also described exhaustion and *“burnout,”* noting that defending rights in emergencies limits capacity for strategic reflection, developing political education programmes, and agenda-setting.

The transience of public attention and harassment

Several respondents observed that public and media interest in migration issues tends to 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 organisations is to create lasting, resilient advocacy efforts that extend beyond crisis responses.**



At the same time, civil-society actors also face rising harassment, accusations of “betraying” South Africans, vigilantism, and political intimidation. As one interviewee from a mainstream organisation reflected: *“It can become difficult to speak on migrant issues... you’re seen as prioritising them”*. A respondent from a legal organisation noted a popular impression that lawyers who work on migrant rights strategic litigation *“don’t care about South Africans”*.

Emergent Migrant-Led Leadership

The sector has shifted toward stronger migrant self-representation, and participants highlighted that migrants are increasingly speaking for themselves which means their words are grounded in lived experience and community legitimacy. As the leader of one hybrid⁹ organisation reflected: *“We are at the centre of what we are doing... we do it for ourselves. This makes our work very much relevant on the ground.”* This shift is important given the hostile political context and reflects broader global trends towards lived-experience-led and migrant-led organising. At the same time, some interviewees expressed caution about the effectiveness of migrant leaders or spokespeople demanding rights within the current climate of xenophobia. One interviewee for example stated:



As a refugee you can’t go to Parliament and tell the SA government what to do. The face plays a very, very important role. You can’t go to Alexandra Stadium to facilitate a community dialogue and you say ‘I’m a refugee’ when people [there] have been crying about refugees [...] If you send someone that I [as a local South African] say “I don’t want him in this country” and you send him to come and speak to me as a local, do you think I’ll listen to that person?

⁹ Hybrid leadership composed of both South Africans and migrants

Opportunities and Momentum

Despite constraints, important openings are emerging. Cross-sector convenings, such as the ‘People on the Move: Priorities – Connect – Recourse’ meeting co-organised by migrant and legal organisations with the UN-HCR in September 2024 and the Porticus-supported MOVE Programme have created shared spaces for strategy, narrative reframing, and horizontal learning were mentioned by interviewees. Litigation alliances – such as Abahlali baseMjondolo joining the KAAX court case on Operation Dudula’s illegal conduct in 2023 (see Text Box 1)- have demonstrated the power of coordinated legal and public-facing action.

Solidarity is growing across different issues: youth collectives, labour networks, health-justice actors, and faith-based organisations are increasingly connecting migrant rights to broader struggles for equality and accountability. These are embryonic but significant seeds of movement infrastructure. As one respondent put it: ***“Migrant rights must be part of the bigger fight - for health, housing, dignity, and justice - otherwise we remain isolated and reactive.”***



In April 2025, the DHA under Minister Leon Schreiber re-activated the Immigration Advisory Board after a decade-long hiatus in order “to advise the Minister on matters of regulation, policy and any other matter on which the Minister may request advice”. At the time of writing, the 13-member board includes five independent members drawn from civil society and the immigration legal community: James Chapman (head of advocacy and legal advisor at the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town), Mavuso Msimang (former Director-General of Home Affairs and now chairman of the board), Andreas Krensel (managing owner of IBN Immigration Solutions and deputy chair of the board) as well as Zahida Ebrahim and Stefanie de Saude-Darbandi (both immigration-law practitioners). Two representatives of business and labour and six members from government departments are also on the board (88).

The next section examines how rights are contested through documentation, access to services, and everyday interactions and how these areas of contestation shape the opportunities and pathways for collective mobilisation. Across the sector, there is shared recognition that strategic coordination, leadership development, and long-term resourcing are needed- and that cross-sector organising is central to the future of rights-based mobilisation.

4. Migrant Rights in Policy and Practice

4.1 Introduction; From Constitutional Rights to Conditional Access

SA's Constitution guarantees socio-economic rights to "everyone." In practice, however, access to those rights increasingly depends on documentation - a bureaucratic gatekeeper that determines rights bearing personhood, legitimacy, and belonging in the nation. As a political and social activist interviewee said: *"The entire system is based on dompas. It's based on documentation [...] It always has been from the apartheid days all the way through"*

Access to documentation fundamentally shapes the ability to work, study, move safely, obtain health care, and exercise legal rights. Rights exist on paper, but in practice depend on one's ability to navigate, negotiate, or pay one's way through a system structured to exclude.



Documentation has become a central gatekeeper of rights; it represents a powerful and pervasive mechanism through which this gap between rights and reality is enforced. Yet, documentation is neither an absolute nor consistent gatekeeper: even those with valid papers may be denied services, while bribes can secure access for those without.

4.2 Documentation as a Determinant of Rights and Safety

For poor Black South Africans and migrants alike, an ID, permit, or birth certificate play a central role in defining belonging, legitimacy and access to basic service. However, the DHA that issues this documentation is plagued by backlogs, corruption, and mismanagement (89–91). By 2023, more than 250 000 late birth registrations were pending, with some families waiting up to seven years (92). 10% of births between 2011 and 2022 were not registered (93,94). This disproportionately affects poor and rural households, and especially women who tend to take care of registering children (95,96). The department has also blocked the IDs of thousands of South Africans without due process (97); many wait months or years to resolve cases, losing access to health, schooling, grants, and employment.

For migrants and refugees, the barriers are steeper. Refugee Reception Offices (RROs) are scarce, frequently closed, and marred by corruption (90,98–100). Amendments to the Refugee Act in 2017 and 2019 imposed tighter deadlines and renewal requirements, causing many to lose legal status overnight (101). Arbitrary rejections are common and interviews with Refugee Status Determination Officer are often rushed, adversarial or poorly translated (102–104). Appeals can drag on for years. There are routine demands for bribes to secure appointments or expedite applications, while those unable to pay risk indefinite waiting or arrest (98,105).

Children born in SA to undocumented parents are often denied birth certificates when parents cannot produce IDs or passports, leaving them stateless (93,106,107). Even where valid refuge or asylum documents exist, they are frequently rejected by schools, hospitals, or banks (108,109). The state thus manufactures "illegality" through inaccessible systems, arbitrary decisions, and bureaucratic neglect, keeping entire populations vulnerable to exclusion, detention, and deportation (110). **Interviewees consistently described documentation as the decisive factor in whether migrants can safely live, move, and access basic services.** The asylum system's



chronic delays, digital barriers, and discretionary decision-making create long periods of legal uncertainty that expose individuals to exclusion. Interviewees emphasised that administrative breakdown and political hostility have compounded this insecurity - with individuals often spending years attempting to regularise or renew their status. This bureaucratic precarity spills directly into daily risk. Organisations reported widespread fear of roadblocks, police harassment, and arbitrary detention tied to documentation status.

4.3 Access to Services: Rights on Paper, Barriers in Practice

Health care

The Constitution guarantees everyone the right to access health care - including reproductive services - and prohibits the refusal of emergency treatment. The Refugees Act (1998) extends these protections to refugees, and a 2007 Department of Health (DoH) circular confirmed that asylum-seekers - documented or not - are entitled to the same care. In 2023, the Gauteng High Court reaffirmed that all pregnant and lactating women, and children under six are entitled to free public services, regardless of nationality or documentation (60).

Yet in practice, collapsing infrastructure, chronic staff shortages, stockouts, and unlawful demands for documents to access treatment restrict access (30, 54, 111–116). Access is further undermined by hidden costs such as transport fares to health care facilities and lost income when missing work to wait in long queues at clinics or hospitals (3, 117, 118).

Maternal and mental health services are especially neglected: abuse in maternity wards, denial of care, and inadequate facilities are the cause of many preventable maternal deaths (119, 120). The underfunding of mental health and lack of accountability remain acute, exemplified by the Life Esidimeni tragedy, where 144 psychiatric patients died after being transferred to unlicensed NGOs (121).

For migrants, xenophobia compounds these systemic failures. Migrants are often pushed to the back of queues, blamed for “overburdening” the system, and subjected to verbal abuse or extortion. Demands for IDs, birth certificates, or permits - often unlawful - are routinely used to delay or deny treatment (122, 123). Even valid asylum or refugee permits are frequently dismissed as “not proper ID.” Fear of harassment or arrest discourages migrants from challenging these violations, entrenching cycles of silent exclusion (108, 124).



Documentation has thus become a mechanism for rationing health care. Rights exist on paper, but in practice often depend on one’s ability to navigate, negotiate, or pay one’s way through a system that excludes.

Education: The Right to Learn vs. the Reality of Exclusion

Section 29 of the Constitution guarantees everyone the right to basic education (125), reinforced by multiple policies: the Admissions Policy for Ordinary Public Schools (1996, updated 2021 to explicitly include asylum-seekers and refugees) (126, 127), Department of Basic Education circulars (2019 and 2021), and the 2024 Basic Education Laws Amendment Act which explicitly prohibits the exclusion of undocumented learners.¹⁰ Refugees and asylum-seekers are also entitled to education on the same terms as citizens (68).

¹⁰ The Act also protects learning and teaching in all languages. Although the Language in Education Policy (1997) promotes mother-tongue instruction, most poor and rural schools switch to English in Grade 4, regardless of whether learners have attained proficiency. Migrant learners from francophone, lusophone, or Swahili-speaking backgrounds often enter classrooms where instruction is in English or Afrikaans, with little to no support for second-language acquisition. No official policy exists for integrating other linguistic needs. Sometimes, schools refuse a migrant child outright on the basis of not speaking the language of instruction (128).

Despite this strong legal framework, many schools continue to deny enrolment or exam registration to learners without birth certificates, IDs, or permits. In 2016, the Eastern Cape Department of Education required birth certificates for school admission, excluding learners and withholding subsidies from schools enrolling undocumented children (129). Courts have consistently affirmed that documentation is immaterial to a child's right to attend school - most notably the 2020 Grahamstown High Court ruling that stated that *“the Department of Basic Education and the Provincial Department are acting unconstitutionally in not permitting children to continue receiving education in public schools purely by reason of the fact that they lack identification documents”* (130–132). However, the practice remains.



The absence of documents also blocks access to fee exemptions, school feeding schemes, and social grants (133–134). While refugee and asylum-seeking parents are in theory eligible for exemptions, applications are often rejected in practice, and undocumented parents are barred entirely (135). The result is that children are excluded not only from classrooms, but from critical forms of social support.

For those who do attend school, conditions are often unsafe and inadequate (136,137). Overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and poor infrastructure remain widespread, especially in historically neglected provinces like Eastern Cape and Limpopo. The 2014 death of five-year-old Michael Komape in a pit latrine tragically underscored the dangers of unsafe school facilities (138). Feeding schemes - vital lifelines for children that supply them with both nutrition and the ability to concentrate - are plagued by corruption and late deliveries (139–142).

4.4 From Exclusion to Rights-Based Mobilisation

Across health care, education, and social services, documentation has become a key gatekeeper of rights. Whether in clinics that deny treatment or schools that exclude children, papers play a critical role in determining access rather than constitutional guarantees. This reproduces apartheid-era logics of control, criminalises mobility, and entrenches marginalisation for both migrants and poor Black South Africans.

It is in this shared space of exclusion that rights-based mobilisation becomes urgent - not only to defend legal entitlements but to build collective power and reshape narratives. Migrants - alongside poor Black South Africans - find themselves pushed to the margins of health, education, and social systems. **Yet these shared vulnerabilities also open a space for solidarity. Mobilising around rights is therefore not only about protecting migrants but about defending the integrity of SA's democratic project itself.**



The following section turns to movement-building and advocacy, asking how migrant organisations, civil society actors, and allies might confront exclusionary politics, reshape public narratives, and reclaim rights as a basis for justice and belonging.

5. Movement -Building for Migrant Rights in SA



Text Box 2: Social Movements and their importance

Social movement definition

Diani defines social movements as “*networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities*” (143).

Why now and why does it matter?

SA is at an inflection point where building a broad-based social movement around key issues that cut across migrant rights and those of South Africans can help re-energise the democratic project and support the progressive realisation of rights guaranteed in the Constitution.

Movement-building matters because:

- The policy environment is regressing - from universal rights to security-led exclusion
- Public systems are under severe strain and scapegoating of migrants obscures governance failure
- Civic space is narrowing, and rights are defended case-by-case, not systemically
- Fragmentation undermines power, while opponents enjoy high visibility
- Migrant precarity mirrors broader inequality, creating openings for shared struggle
- Xenophobic discrimination is increasingly normalised

Yet, the current landscape also presents real opportunity:

- Litigation victories demonstrate collective strength
- New migrant-led organisations are emerging
- Shared spaces for strategy are emphasising the need for strengthening coordination
- Public support for accountability, transparency and fairness is high amid governance

Mobilisation for migrant rights is therefore not only about defending one community; it is part of the broader struggle for dignity, equality, and democratic accountability for everyone in SA.

5.1 Introduction: from Fragmented Resistance to Collective Strategizing

Interviewees emphasised that SA's migrant-rights landscape is at a critical turning point. Civil society is a vital yet overstretched safety net in areas where the state has retreated from or neglected its support. Since 2022, vigilante mobilisation and anti-migrant rhetoric have gained political traction, influencing institutional practice across clinics, schools, and local government.

Recent policy developments (illustrated in Table 1 and in Figure 2) reinforce this trajectory. Despite these conditions, civil society continues to secure rights and provide essential support. Organisations such as Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR), the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in SA (CoRMSA), and the Scalabrini Centre and others have advanced inclusive policy positions, secured landmark rulings and, provided direct assistance where government systems have failed. Yet, the space in which they operate is narrowing. Political hostility, misinformation campaigns, and attempts to delegitimise litigation weaken institutional protections and erode public trust.

Even under pressure, organisations demonstrate resilience and creativity, drawing on solidarity networks and partnerships with faith-based and social justice allies. Their strength lies in community legitimacy, lived experience, and real-time documentation of rights violations. However, limited mobilisation capacity, financial precarity, and donor-driven agendas constrain long-term strategy. **Civil society thus remains a critical - yet stretched - guardian of migrant rights. Its central challenge now is to transform fragmented advocacy into sustained, national level movement-building capable of contesting securitisation, shifting public narratives and advancing equality for all.**



5.2 The 'Migrant Sector' Ecosystem

In 2022, Porticus funded research on mobilising for migrant rights in SA and Southern Africa employed an ecosystem mapping approach to characterise the migrant landscape at that time. It plotted migrant organisations as well as key government, private sector, donor, and civil society actors that 'shape outcomes for migrants' (144). That report argued that such an approach "*allows organisations to think beyond their immediate core business – partners, clients, suppliers, funders, [...] and allows us to view actors relationally, and identify visible and invisible actors*" (144).

This research report draws on this methodology but simplified it focussing on 53 actors that were most influential in shaping migrant lives and migrant issues in 2025. It is important to read this map as reflecting a particular point in time, and that dynamics can differ dramatically in different provinces. The ecosystem is offered as an entry-point into a broader discussion about specific strategies needed to bring about social change and should be adapted to each location and regularly revised to take new national and geo-political developments into account.

Map Legend¹¹

Axes:

- **Involvement (Y Axis):** indicates how important migrants are to the core mandate, mission, or activities of a stakeholder.
- **Attitude (X Axis):** indicates stakeholder attitudes – positive or negative – towards migrants, including their commitment to migrant rights over other priorities.

Actor Attitudes

- **Villains** are highly involved with and visibly hostile towards migrants either through their rhetoric or actions.
- **Cynics'** behaviour – actions or inactions, policies, or attitudes work against migrant interests, although migrants are not a central focus their work.
- **Neutrals** and **Indifferents:** are generally neutral in their attitudes towards migrants, but differentiated by their level of involvement. Neutrals are more involved with migrant issues, while Indifferents are less so.
- **Allies** are actors that focus on shared issues that affect host communities and migrants (e.g. shelter, education, health, gender based violence, etc.). Some may work directly with migrants, but no allies are refugee or migrant-led organisations.
- **Champions** are actors whose strategies, mission and programs focus on migrants/refugees/asylum seekers, specifically as part of their mandate.

¹¹ The Legend terminology is taken from (144).

MIGRANT SECTOR STAKEHOLDER MAPPING 2025

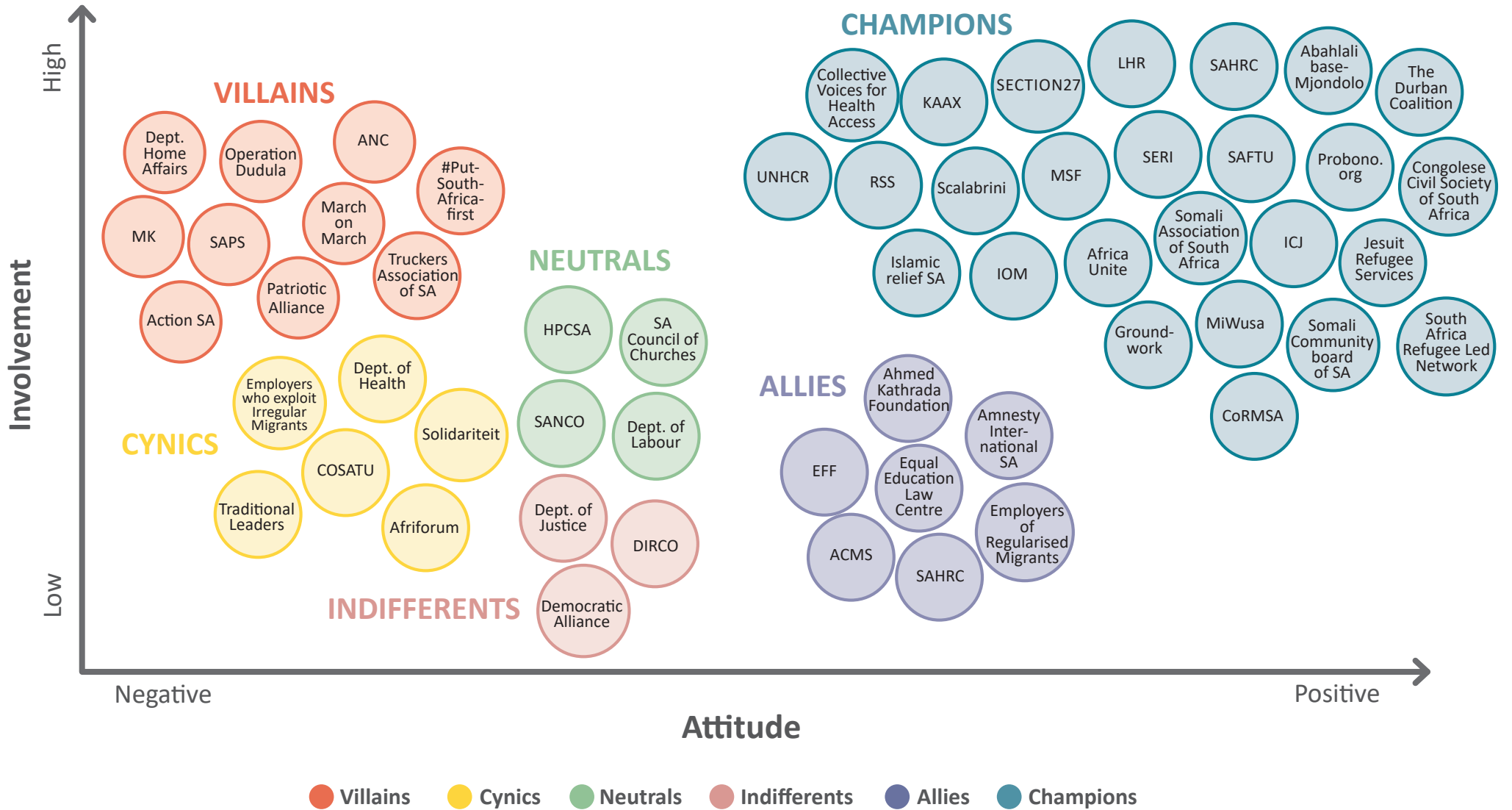


Figure 2: Migrant sector Ecosystem 2025

Analysis

Although many of these organisations are relatively small or focused narrowly on migrant-specific issues, there is a critical mass of mainstream institutions with broader mandates that could be strategically mobilised into a stronger, more coordinated movement. At the same time, several government departments and populist groupings sit firmly within the “Villains” and “Cynics” categories and wield disproportionate influence through their direct access to state power, the media, and policy-making processes.

A central strategic task is therefore to shift the “Neutrals” and “Indifferents” toward active allyship by highlighting how governance failures: documentation backlogs, collapsing health systems, corruption, austerity measures, and chronic unemployment, affect both migrants and citizens in similar ways. Current political narratives often pit communities against each other, obscuring shared grievances and shielding the state from accountability. This mapping illustrates opportunities to build cross-community solidarity by reframing the conversation from competition to collective struggle.

The following key observations emerge:



- **Power asymmetry is structurally embedded**

The concentration of hostile or obstructionist actors (“Villains” and “Cynics”) in positions of high involvement highlights a structurally unequal advocacy environment. Departments such as the DHA, DoH and SAPS have coercive power, gatekeeping authority over documentation, mobility, and access to services, which gives them disproportionate influence compared with migrant-aligned organisations. This shapes the environment within which any movement-building must occur and creates a baseline context of institutionalised exclusion.

- **Champion organisations are strong in principle but weak in political leverage**

Although Champions (e.g., KAAX, CoRMSA, SERI, IOM, SAHRC, MSF, Scalabrini) possess technical expertise, experience, community legitimacy, credibility, and/or moral authority, many lack the political power, scale, or financial stability to challenge state narratives at a systemic level. Their influence relies on litigation, advocacy, community organising, and moral legitimacy rather than institutional leverage. This is not always consistent and some organisations are more involved than others – and some voices (not always the most involved organisations) are louder than others. This means coalition-building is critical to amplify their reach.

- **The Neutral and Indifferent blocs represent the greatest opportunity for shift**

Neutrals include institutions like COSATU, SANCO, and Sectoral Councils have broad social reach but inconsistent or ambiguous positions on migrant rights. Many are not actively anti-migrant, but lack motivation or clear frameworks to engage constructively. Strategic engagement, framing migrant inclusion as beneficial to broader labour rights, health access, and social cohesion could activate these actors. The “Indifferents” - such as DIRCO or the Democratic Alliance (DA)- often have policy reach but low involvement (often opportunistic), suggesting potential to channel their influence through targeted advocacy and evidence. Landau et al similarly recommended more focus on ‘the movable middle’, i.e. ‘building bridges between champions, neutrals and allies (145)

- **Populist groups act as high-impact disruptors**

Actors like Operation Dudula, Patriotic Alliance, and #PutSouthAfricansFirst have outsized influence through visibility, coordinated mobilisations, and algorithmic manipulation on digital platforms. Their reach does not rely on evidence or institutional legitimacy but on emotional narratives. These groups might be able to shift public perception more rapidly than formal institutions, requiring a communication strategy that counters misinformation and reframes narratives.

- **Fragmentation within civil society weakens collective action**

The wide distribution of allies and champions shows strong intent and expertise but in line with the findings of this report highlights fragmentation across legal, humanitarian, community-based, and advocacy organisations. Without strategic alignment or coordinated messaging, efforts remain siloed, limiting their collective influence. Coalition-building must emphasise shared strategy.

- **Government departments in Villains and Cynics shape institutional hostility**

The placement of the DHA, SAPS, and the DoH in obstructive or hostile categories underscores how state-led xenophobia becomes normalised. These institutions control key systems - documentation, policing, access points to healthcare - meaning their hostility translates into structural discrimination. Any reform strategy must therefore target bureaucratic behaviour, budget allocations, and accountability mechanisms, not only public narratives.

- **Potential allies require reframing and bridge-building**

Institutions like the Equal Education Law Centre, faith-based organisations, organised labour and SANCO may mobilise once migrant rights are framed within broader struggles for social justice, equality, and state accountability. Migrant rights framed solely within a humanitarian discourse risks alienating these actors; framing within anti-corruption, service delivery, and constitutional protections may create resonance.

5.3 Concepts of Migrant Rights and Movement-Building

Interviewee understandings of “migrant rights” varied, highlighting the absence of a unified conceptual framework. Many grounded their approach in constitutional guarantees of dignity and equality; others stressed situating migrant justice within broader struggles for socio-economic rights, racial justice and democratic renewal.

Several participants cautioned that the terms “migrant” and “migrant rights” can reinforce othering. An interviewee who has worked in the field for more than 20 years noted:



One of the things that I think we need to move away from very intentionally is using the word “migrant rights” [...] I worry that we’re losing solidarity because we’re putting people’s backs up around. South Africans are feeling that when there’s a migrant issue, all these organizations get together and we rush, and we amplify the problem, but we don’t do it when a South African is facing the same sort of challenges.

A social and political activist noted: *“The challenge with migrant rights in SA is not to make it a migrant issue... but to get South Africans themselves [involved]”*. A human rights activist similarly emphasised: *“Lecturing poor people on abstract human rights when their own human rights are being violated on a daily basis doesn’t wash [make sense].”*



Workshop participants echoed this and suggested framing around “human rights” rather than “migrant rights” to build solidarity rather than separation.

Most agreed SA currently lacks a cohesive migrant rights movement, with current efforts characterised by fragmented networks and short-term crisis responses often shaped by donor priorities. One respondent reflected that much of the existing migration sector collaboration lacks a foundation in movement-building, a point worth quoting at length:

“

“[...] there is not the politics of the anti-apartheid struggle that was the glue that held collaborations, alliances and networks together on principles of non-sectarianism but [also] unity in action against a common enemy. It is the politics of movement-building that is the issue [in the migration sector]. Collaboration is often driven by individuals, and these collaborations are not rooted in movement-building and engaging/empowering the people directly affected.

Collaborations are then reduced to semantics of “[Is] this afrophobia or is this xenophobia?” for example [...] When it comes to addressing migration, it is difficult to extricate the collaboration from politics of identity related issues. And it is difficult to root this in class, gender and race-based politics of discrimination and exclusion. Often it is the lowest common denominator that informs the collaboration which often gets reduced to social cohesion. And this will not deal with the criminalisation of movement of people. This will not deal with precarious forms of work [...].

This highlights the complexities of building cohesive social movements within the migrant sector. Interviewees stressed common agendas and building beyond litigation and service delivery towards grassroots organising, political education, narrative change, media savviness and intersectional solidarity.

What movement building means

Movement-building was described as slow, relational work based on shared purpose, leadership development, and organic strategies. In an interview with a social and political activist, he described it as:



“Movement-building is the pulling together of people with a common purpose, to bring about change, and whose format should be organic to its circumstances [...] It’s got to be an organic process of building a movement out of the realities of where people are. Wherever that’s geographically or if it’s within a community of purpose.”

This directly points to the need for a common agenda and aim and how to build momentum around these. Examples of such mobilisation are explored in Section 6.

Social movements typically differ from NGOs and coalitions, though they may include them. While NGOs focus on specific projects and coalitions unite around single issues, movements foster lasting collective identities and broader systemic change (146).

From the literature, the following key elements of social movement-building emerge:

- **Clear collective identity and framing:** Identity formation is crucial to movement-building (147). Wang and Tracey describe it as *“a sense of belonging to an in-group whose interests and values are different to those of out-group members”* - a dynamic that is particularly powerful for stigmatised or marginalised groups (148). A shared identity and compelling narrative that unifies participants and frames grievances effectively (149).
- **Strong leadership and organizational structure:** Leadership that can mobilize, strategize, and sustain momentum, supported by clear roles and coordination (150).
- **Resource mobilization:** Access to financial, human, and informational resources to support activities and outreach (151).
- **Political opportunity structures:** A favourable or shifting political environment that enables influence on policy or public opinion (152).



- **Coalition building and alliances:** Social movements can use coalition-building as one of its strategies for systemic change. Strategic partnerships with NGOs, civil society, and transnational actors to amplify impact (153).
- **Public support and media visibility:** Legitimacy and resonance with broader public values, aided by effective, eloquent and strategic media engagement (154).
- **Tactical innovation and flexibility:** Use of diverse and adaptive strategies, from protests to digital activism, to respond to changing contexts (155).

5.4 Sector Strengths: Emerging foundations

Despite pressures, migrant organisations continue to demonstrate resilience and make meaningful contributions. Findings show strong community legitimacy rooted in lived experience, and constitutional literacy within the sector. Participants noted that organisations overall have become *“more organised, knowledgeable and strategic in their approach”*.

Key strengths include:

- deep community legitimacy, rooted in lived experience
- constitutional literacy and rights-based expertise
- growing strategic vision, discipline and coordination
- ability to document violations and engage institutions
- reliance on solidarity networks, volunteers and allies

Strategic litigation remains a vital tool to challenge exclusionary practices and hold the state accountable – e.g. Text Box 1 set out two key cases on access to health care. Yet, interviewees stressed the limits of legal wins as a transformative tool. While court victories secure important precedents, they do not automatically shift xenophobic public attitudes or institutional practices. For example, some people resumed to block access to clinics in Gauteng shortly after the High court judgment interdicted Operation Dudula from doing so (156). In migration and health, the *“right to have rights”* remains contested, and the strong reliance on the courts indicates the absence of a broader societal consensus. **Legal action must therefore be paired with efforts to monitor the implementation of court orders, change narratives, build solidarity, and address structural inequities.** Emerging solidarity infrastructures such as accompanying a patient to a clinic, mutual aid networks and collective protection such as the support provided to SERI in response to the Operation Dudula-led protest march could turn fear into agency and signal entry points for movement-building (59,157).



5.5 Collaboration and Emerging Alliances

Participants emphasised that sustainable migrant rights advocacy must be embedded within broader struggles for equality, labour rights and public services access in SA. Litigation alone is insufficient: mass organising, political education and cross-class alliances are required. Examples such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and Abahlali baseMjondolo, were cited as models of rights-based mobilisation rooted in community accountability and lived experience. Yet scarcity and precarity complicate solidarity as one interviewee noted:

“Until people stop being hungry [...] it might be very hard to mainstream this movement.” Another interviewee stated in a similar vein: *“There has to be a whole new culture and narrative created around migration if we’re to see any change on this issue.”*



Thus, the “us versus them” rhetoric complicates civil-society efforts to defend migrant rights without fuelling social tension. **New, cross-sector strategies are urgently required to realise the Freedom Charter’s promise that “SA belongs to all who live in it”.**

Initiatives such as the Porticus MOVE initiative and joint actions between migrant and social-justice organisations - such as civil society uniting behind the KAAX-Operation Dudula court case - demonstrate emerging collaborative pathways- though currently uneven and often dependent on individual commitment rather than institutional architecture.

5.6 Regional and Transnational Solidarity

Beyond SA across the Southern Africa region, migrant and refugee-led organisations are increasingly engaging in cross-border solidarity and advocacy. Networks such as KAAX and the Southern Africa Migration Network (SAMIN) demonstrate the potential - nascent but promising- for coordinated regional responses to shared challenges of securitisation, exclusion, and donor withdrawal. These developments also highlight the value of connecting local struggles to continental and global platforms for rights-based advocacy.

To inform movement building on migrant rights in SA today, the next section of the report looks at the experiences of other movements- within and beyond SA- that have organised under conditions of racialised exclusion, securitisation, and resource precarity.

6. Learning from Others: Social Movement Case Studies

To strengthen movement building efforts, it is helpful to examine the experiences of other movements- within and beyond SA that have organised under conditions of racialised exclusion, securitisation, and resource precarity. This section offers insights into six examples of movements- past and present- that have built solidarity and worked towards structural change: Sans Papiers (France), Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI, USA) and three in SA: the United Democratic Front (UDF) and TAC. We have included KAAX as it is currently an anti-xenophobia coalition in SA that appears to be progressively building a broad-based movement around human rights with a key migration and xenophobia focus. These examples emphasise leadership from those most affected, cross-community alliances, and long-term infrastructure for mobilisation.

Three case studies are explicitly centred on migrant rights, while the examples of the UDF and TAC address broader struggles for dignity and equality. Together, they reveal how collective organisation, leadership development, and cross-community alliances can emerge and endure under conditions of racialised exclusion (158).



6.1 Case Study 1: The Sans Papiers Movement

***“We are not terrorists.
We are not illegals. We
are only looking for a
paper.”***

Ababacar Diop (1997)
Spokesperson for the Sans Papiers

Founded amid intensifying deportations and policing of migrants in the 1970s in France, Sans Papiers (‘without papers’) reframed immigration as a matter of universal human rights and racial justice. The movement explicitly situated migrant struggles within France’s colonial history, confronting intertwined injustices of exploitation, policing, and economic precarity (159).

In 1996, hundreds of undocumented migrants occupied Paris’s Saint-Bernard Church to protest harsh immigration policies. Although they were forcibly evicted, their action galvanised national attention and contributed to one of France’s largest regularisation exercises. From there, the movement evolved into a national network demanding mass regularisation, labour protections, and safeguards against detention and deportation. Local collectives emerged in other French cities, employing tactics such as hunger strikes, building occupations, and legal advocacy.



Photograph: NnoMan Cadoret / Collectif Œil

Gilets Noir occupation at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris in 2019, to protest against deportations and Air France’s involvement in the practice

The Sans Papiers also inspired similar movements across Europe, including in Belgium and Spain. By 2008, Sans Papiers collectives had allied with major trade unions and co-ordinated strikes, factory occupations and regularisation campaigns (160–161). Partnerships with church networks provided both practical support and bolstered public legitimacy. In 2018, the movement re-emerged as the Gilets Noirs (“Black Vests”) who identify as the largest collective of undocumented migrants in France and continue with highly visible protest actions.

Core Practices

- i. **Rejecting ‘Illegality’:** Sans Papiers rejected how the state categorised and criminalised their existence in France as ‘illegals’. Instead, they framed themselves being denied the rights they were entitled to as participating, contributing and integral members of French society (162–163). They “engaged with French history to expand and enrich its form of citizenship”(164).

- ii. Linking migration to colonial and racial justice:** The Sans Papiers connected racial justice, economic justice, and historical accountability. As spokesperson Abacar Diop explained, “It is legitimate that, drained of resources, the peoples of our countries come to make a living here” (165). The movement also highlighted how France profits from undocumented workers while denying rights to those who sustain its economy.
- iii. Self-Representation:** Following the principle “rien sur nous sans nous” (nothing about us without us)(166), migrants constituted the movement’s leadership and directed its communication. This emphasis on autonomy and self-representation cast migrants as political agents, avoided co-optation by NGOs and reclaimed their voice.
- iv. Transversal coalitions:** The Sans Papiers built broad coalitions with trade unions (notably the General Confederation of Labour, one of France’s five major unions), anti-racist movements, faith groups, and intellectuals, amplifying their demands and securing material support. These transversal alliances cut across race, class, and citizenship and situated migrant activism within wider struggles for social and economic justice (160–162,167).
- v. Solidarity resourcing and fundraising:** The movement included different types of migrants from different countries of origin: asylum seekers, refugees, recent arrivals, long-term residents and undocumented migrants “under a shared identity as rights-bearing subjects” (162,165). Despite limited access to funding, the movement sustained itself through solidarity-based resourcing such as donations from unions, churches, and community associations and fundraising at demonstrations and cultural events. Occupied spaces such as Saint-Bernard Church provided shelter and infrastructure, symbolising both refuge and defiance (168–169).
- vi. Visibility and direct confrontation:** The Sans Papiers carried out highly visible occupations of churches, public squares, universities, and corporate offices to create attention and raise awareness (162). In parallel, the movement directly confronted both state institutions and exploitative employers through sit-ins, strikes, and blockades- especially in ‘migrant heavy’ sectors like construction, cleaning, and food delivery (161).
- vii. Local and global registers of resistance:** By drawing connections to the *Gilets jaunes*¹², considering themselves *Sans-culottes contemporains* (contemporary Sans-culottes)¹³ as well as aligning with global anti-racist and anti-colonial movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Sans Papiers/ Gilets noirs embedded their struggle within national and global registers of resistance (171–172).



MOBILISATION TAKEAWAYS FOR SA

- ✓ Centre migrant-led voice and authorship and refuse stigmatising frames.
- ✓ Tie documentation struggles to broader justice narratives such as racism, colonialism and capitalism
- ✓ Build union and faith alliances to gain protection, legitimacy, and reach.

¹² The yellow vests were grassroots protestors in France active around 2018-2020 originally protesting a fuel tax (170).

¹³ The *sans-culottes* were the radical working-class revolutionaries of the French Revolution, mainly artisans and labourers from Paris who demanded equality, affordable food, and direct democracy. They became a powerful political force between 1792 and 1794.



6.2 Case Study 2: Black Alliance for Just Immigration

“There is an even greater effort being made to divide black communities, not just by citizen and non-citizen, but documented and non-documented, refugee and immigrant... we have to push back against that”

Nana Gyamfi,
Executive Director of BAJI

BAJI was founded in 2006 in the USA amid post-9/11 anti-immigrant rhetoric and heightened racial profiling, BAJI reframed immigration as a racial-justice issue rather than solely a legal or humanitarian concern. BAJI challenged the lack of visibility of Black migrants within mainstream US immigration debates (173). BAJI’s organising model combines community education, grassroots leadership development, policy advocacy, and transnational solidarity. It builds alliances between African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African immigrants to confront systemic racism, economic inequality, and state violence, and situates migrant-specific issues like deportation and detention within broader conversations about policing and mass incarceration (174).

Core practices

- i. Black Leadership and Intersectional Vision:** The BAJI was founded to centre Black leadership within immigrant-rights organising, ensuring that the voices and experiences of African Americans and Black immigrants shape the movement’s direction and priorities. It recognises that both groups confront the intertwined forces of systemic racism and economic exploitation, positioning those most affected not merely as participants but as the strategists guiding collective action. This intersectional vision links racial justice and migrant justice, asserting that immigration cannot be meaningfully addressed apart from the broader fight against racism and structural inequality.
- ii. Grassroots committees and emerging youth leadership:** BAJI’s structure is rooted in community organising, with local committees that mobilise faith-based networks, build coalitions, and train community leaders to advance racial and migrant justice. Through its Emerging Youth Leadership Programme, BAJI provides political education, teaches organising skills, and offers mentorship to empower youth to advocate for systemic change within their communities (175). The movement also places strong emphasis on community building- using shared meals, faith gatherings, and leadership workshops to foster trust amongst members.
- iii. Policy Advocacy, Research, and Narrative Change:** BAJI engages in policy advocacy at both local and national levels, working on immigration and detention reform while ensuring that Black migrants’ experiences are represented in policy arenas often dominated by Latinx narratives. Alongside advocacy, it produces research reports and storytelling projects work to shift public narratives away from criminalisation toward Black liberation. Campaigns such as #EndTransDetention illustrate BAJI’s integrated approach, combining policy engagement with education and movement-building to foster intersectional solidarity across communities.

iv. Border and Detention Monitoring: BAJI uses a combination of on the ground monitoring and legal advocacy to hold institutions accountable. Its Black Lives at the Border initiative sends delegations to detention facilities to document abuses and provide support to detained migrants. Through Freedom of Information Act lawsuits, BAJI has exposed systemic discrimination within immigration enforcement systems, revealing that Black immigrants are disproportionately subjected to solitary confinement and other forms of state violence.

v. Solidarity Across Communities and Borders: BAJI builds alliances with Latinx and Asian organisations while also cultivating transnational connections with movements across Africa and the Caribbean.

vi. Resourcing and Sustainability: BAJI is funded by a mix of grants from foundations, labour unions, and individual donors, combining institutional support with grassroots contributions. This diversified approach helps sustain the organisation’s independence while enabling long-term advocacy and cross-movement alliance-building.



MOBILISATION TAKEAWAYS FOR SA

- ✓ Develop leadership pipelines and policy analysis capacity within migrant-led groups.
- ✓ Pair monitoring and evidence with advocacy to force institutional response.
- ✓ Diversify funding to protect autonomy and long-term strategy.



6.3 Case Study 3: The United Democratic Front under apartheid

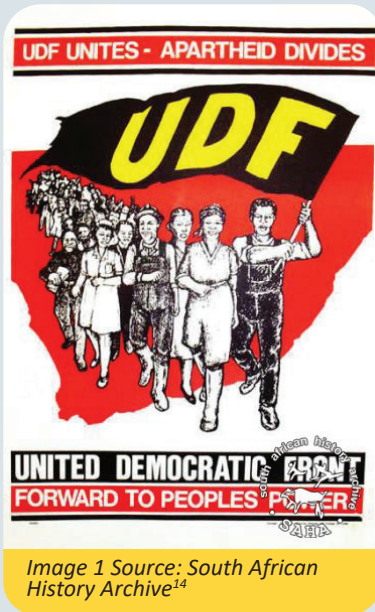


Image 1 Source: South African History Archive¹⁴

The UDF was established in 1983 to coordinate protest against a new constitution that co-opted so-called “Coloureds” and Indians but excluded Africans from political representation (176). This was deliberate attempt to fragment resistance and undermine solidarity, extending a history of divide-and-rule tactics, including DF Malan earlier characterisation of Indians in the 1925 Areas Reservation and Immigration Bill in 1925, ‘alien and unassimilable’ (177) and the state-fuelled hostility that contributed to the 1949 Durban Riots during which 142 people were killed and over a thousand injured (178). Such dynamics were later echoed in xenophobic attacks such as those in 2008. Against this backdrop, the UDF built a coalition of over 400 civic, youth, women’s, religious, and labour organisations, advancing a vision of non-racial, participatory democracy and “maximum unity of the oppressed” (179,180).

It’s slogan **“Apartheid Divides, UDF Unites”** embodied a vision of non-racial, linking local struggles over housing, education, and wages to the broader collective fight for liberation (177), while the Freedom Charter campaign’s widespread grassroots consultations helped embed a collective, inclusive political vision. To write it, they collected demands and grievances through widespread “Freedom Charter campaigns” which allowed interracial collaboration from the grassroots upward (178). As van Kessel writes, *“while the affiliates pursued their own agenda, the UDF infused these struggles with a broader meaning”* (176).

Core Practices

- i. **Creating unity across divides:** Despite efforts to ‘divide and rule’, the shared experience of dispossession, exclusion, and racial subjugation fostered cooperation across racial lines (181). Though not without tensions over representation, privilege, and risk (182,183), collective solidarity emerged and took many forms such as joint campaigns, political alliances, women’s organising and labour militancy. An early milestone was the 1947 Doctors’ Pact, where Monty Naicker, Yusuf Dadoo, and Alfred Xuma pledged cooperation between African and Indian movements in the struggle for equality (177). Partnership deepened during the 1952 Defiance Campaign, jointly organised by the ANC and the South African Indian Congress, and the 1955 Congress of the People, which adopted the Freedom Charter, a collective declaration that “SA belongs to all who live in it”(184).
- ii. **Women’s Leadership:** Women were central to sustaining cross-racial solidarity. Leaders such as Fatima Meer and Kesaveloo Goonam challenged both apartheid and patriarchy, mobilising through the Federation of South African Women and leading the historic 1956 Women’s March,

¹⁴ South African History Archive https://www.saha.org.za/udf/udf_unites_apartheid_divides_udf_united_democratic_front_forward_to_peoples_power.htm

where over 20 000 women protested the pass laws (185). Worker struggles further fostered collaboration. In the Durban strikes of 1973, African workers initiated mass industrial action against poor wages that soon included Indian and so-called “Coloured” workers too and gave all workers “a sense of solidarity and potential power” (186).

- iii. Decentralised Structure and Flexibility:** The UDF’s decentralised network empowered local and regional affiliates to define their own strategies within a shared political framework. Its neighbourhood and regional committees became spaces of political learning and collective decision-making. The UDF fostered community ownership and resilience (178) which meant that even under intense repression- including detentions, banning, and successive states of emergency – the organisation was able to adapt and reorganise. By the late 1980s, it evolved into the Mass Democratic Movement, maintaining internal coordination while becoming more diffuse and harder for the apartheid state to contain (187,188).
- iv. Mass Mobilisation, Shared Risk Taking and Sacrifices across Race and Class:** Mass mobilisation such as stay-aways, boycotts, strikes, rent protests, student uprisings, and community defence were central tools for building interracial solidarity. It was important that members of all communities were willing to take - and seen as taking- risks, even if it meant imprisonment (146). Through this objective leaders worked towards unity across different groups. By foregrounding leaders from different racialised groups, alliances projected unity and undermined apartheid propaganda that communities were inherently divided. UDF’s leadership deliberately included people from different racial and class origins, preventing the struggle from being racially siloed. For example, South African sociologist Indian Fatima Meer co-founded the Black Women’s Federation (1975) with Winnie Mandela, which organised the women’s march at the Union Buildings, Pretoria, in 1956 (189).
- v. Global Solidarity and Resourcing:** Anti-apartheid activism drew broad international backing from governments, grassroots movements, trade unions, and churches, with coordinated boycotts, sanctions, and divestment campaigns that isolated the regime diplomatically and economically, amplifying resistance. In terms of funding of the UDF, Mass Democratic Movement, and Allied Structures - after 1985, South African church partners- including Archbishop Desmond Tutu- helped to set up the Kagiso Trust to channel the European Community’s Special Programme for the Victims of Apartheid into civic, legal-aid and development projects (190). Legal-defence pipelines were anchored by the International Defence and Aid Fund, which covertly financed lawyers and sustained thousands of activists through prolonged repression (191). The Canon Collins scholarships enabled organisers to pursue study law, education and related fields in SA and abroad (192). On the mass-mobilisation front, the British Anti-Apartheid Movement turned public campaigning into money and pressure (193).
- vi. Leadership Development and Political Education:** The UDF’s educational approach drew on the ideas of Paulo Freire, especially the notion of dialogical education and linking self-reflection with collective struggle (194).



MOBILISATION TAKEAWAYS FOR SA

- ✓ Invest in popular education and decentralised structures for local ownership while creating an overarching goal.
- ✓ Frame migrant justice within shared socio-economic concerns to build unity.
- ✓ Pair mass action with litigation and global solidarity to widen leverage.



6.4 Case Study 4: The Treatment Action Campaign

“The only reason we are dying is because we are poor.”

Zackie Achmat, Co-founder,
Treatment Action Campaign
2003

Founded in 1998, TAC is widely regarded as one of SA’s most influential post-apartheid social movements. TAC challenged the AIDS denialism under Thabo Mbeki’s administration and challenged multinational pharmaceutical companies that were blocking the importation of affordable generic drugs. Beyond transforming public perception of HIV/AIDS and the stigma that attaches to people living with HIV/AIDS, TAC redefined public health as a site of democratic struggle. Its efforts led to historic legal victories, expanded access to treatment, and mass destigmatisation of HIV (195).

Core Practices

- i. **Collective identity and community support:** By framing HIV/AIDS as a **social justice issue**, TAC helped individuals see their pain and exclusion as part of a broader structural injustice. TAC’s local branches and treatment literacy workshops became **safe spaces** where people could share their experiences, fears, and struggles without judgment. These community-based structures provided not only information about medicine and rights, but also emotional support, collective grieving, and hope (196,197).
- ii. **Civil Disobedience and Media Strategy:** TAC was exceptionally skilled at generating media attention and producing its own media content to shape public opinion. From the outset, TAC understood that the struggle for treatment was also a struggle over narratives: they had to counter government denialism, pharmaceutical industry propaganda, and the stigma surrounding HIV. They issued frequent press releases, held high-profile marches with striking visual imagery and used civil disobedience actions designed to attract cameras and headlines (198). Wearing T-shirts emblazoned with “HIV POSITIVE” during marches and other forms of protest, TAC helped ‘to break down the secrecy, shame and stigma that surrounded HIV’ (199). TAC activists gave powerful testimony about their lives, putting a human face to the epidemic and making it harder for leaders to ignore the crisis.



Image 2: TAC Poster for its Civil Disobedience Campaign in 2003¹⁵



Image 3: TAC T-Shirts ‘HIV POSITIVE’¹⁶

- iii. **Confronting Corporate Power:** TAC directly challenged multinational pharmaceutical corporations that sought to block SA from producing or importing affordable generic ARVs. TAC activists staged demonstrations outside pharmaceutical offices and imported generics illegally in acts of symbolic civil disobedience. These actions reframed civil disobedience as moral necessity, echoing the anti-apartheid tradition of mass protest and positioning access to medicine as a constitutional right (200,199–201).

¹⁵ TAC Poster for Civil Disobedience Campaign in 2003 <https://mulpress.mcmaster.ca/globalabour/article/view/2366/2485>

¹⁶ TAC T-Shirts <https://www.tac.org.za/timeline/>

iv. Strategic litigation: TAC took the government to court after it refused to provide the life-saving anti-retroviral drug nevirapine beyond a handful of pilot sites. TAC argued that denying access was unconstitutional, given that the right to health is enshrined in SA's Bill of Rights. The Constitutional Court agreed, ordering the state to roll out the drug across the public health system. This victory affirmed the constitutional promise that socio-economic rights were justiciable and that the state could be held accountable for failing to deliver them (202).

v. Knowledge, health and politics: Through workshops, pamphlets, and peer-to-peer education in townships, rural areas, and clinics, TAC trained thousands of activists and community members to become experts in their own treatment. This not only empowered people living with HIV to take control of their health but also built confidence to challenge doctors, nurses, and politicians who downplayed the epidemic or denied the science. It was an educational learning process through which members gained an understanding of health as linked to social and political analysis, human rights and the positive duties of the state (201). Becoming a TAC activist became a social identity and source of pride.

“For many of us in TAC, this organisation became a centre of learning and leading... a home where we learned about politics, leadership, democracy, law and social mobilisation” (153)

vi. Building alliances at multiple scales: TAC forged strategic networks with local and international activist groups, researchers, academics, clinicians, labour organisations and faith-based organisations (203). They deliberately connected HIV/AIDS to struggles over inequality, poverty, and the failures of post-apartheid democracy to deliver social rights (204).

vii. From Movement to Monitor: TAC and partner organisations launched the Ritshidze project in 2020 as a community-led monitoring initiative to improve SA's public healthcare system. Ritshidze systematically collects evidence from patients and communities about conditions in clinics and hospitals (205). The project produces detailed reports and scorecards, which are presented publicly to health authorities at district, provincial, and national levels, forcing accountability through transparency, showing how communities can generate powerful data to demand dignity, better services, and systemic reform (206).



MOBILISING TAKEAWAYS FOR SA

- ✓ Combine court wins with mass public education to shift institutions and norms.
- ✓ Build community monitoring to turn evidence into ongoing leverage.
- ✓ Use bold, consistent narrative symbols to destigmatise and mobilise.
- ✓ Actively build a movement identity and sense of belonging.



6.5 Case Study 5: Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia

A South Africa - and an Africa - where everyone is safe, valued, and free from fear. A continent where borders do not divide people, but where solidarity, equality, and justice transcend nationality.

KAAX website

KAAX is a South African civil society coalition formed in response to rising xenophobic violence. The coalition brings together migrant-led and South African organisations, trade unions, churches, human-rights groups, and grassroots movements to collectively challenge hate speech, vigilante violence, and the growing securitisation of migration. KAAX emerged as a coordinated civic response to Operation Dudula and other anti-migrant movements that weaponised poverty and nationalism to justify exclusion. Its public campaigns, marches, and social media interventions directly confront state inaction, while its partnerships with legal and faith-based organisations provide protection and advocacy for those targeted by violence. In doing so, KAAX seems to represent both a defensive front against xenophobia and a proactive effort to rebuild solidarity among marginalised communities.

This case study is based on interviews with KAAX members and KAAX internal documents provided to the authors.

Core Practices

- i. **Coalition-Based Organising and Inclusive Membership:** KAAX is structured as a broad, non-hierarchical alliance that brings together over 50 partner organisations. The work is ‘structured around three essential working groups: Media, Political Education, and Humanitarian/Outreach’ (207). “Kopanang,” meaning “come together” in Sesotho, captures the coalition’s ethos of solidarity across nationality, race, and class. Rather than treating xenophobia as an isolated social problem, KAAX frames it as a symptom of structural inequality and political scapegoating. Its work builds on the legacies of anti-apartheid organising and regional Pan-Africanism.



“We’re not interested in building another NGO. We’re not interested in building another service organisation, which is services, a particular sector of the migrant community and those are needed and understandable. It’s not to critique them and to say that they’re not necessary, but it’s just to say that if you want to build a movement, you’ve got to get over your own ideological posturing. You’ve got to get over your own narrowness of political understandings of things, and whether that’s on a national basis, linguistic basis, cultural, racial, ethnic, building. A movement is about inclusivity.”

(Interview, KAAX activist, October 2024)

ii. Strategic litigation: In May 2023, KAAX and allied organizations lodged a case in the Gauteng High Court that contained evidence of 40 individuals who testified to harassment, intimidation, and violence by Operation Dudula members (see Text Box 1). The case has drawn broad civil society interest and included a range of amici (friends of the court): Media Monitoring Africa intervened on digital rights, the International Commission of Jurists raised international law obligations, and the SA Human Rights Commission flagged risks for children (61).



Image 4: KAAX¹⁷

iii. Public Mobilisation: KAAX organises public demonstrations to demand accountability and challenge xenophobia. On Africa Day, 25 May 2022, it led a picket outside the SAHRC offices in Johannesburg, arguing that celebrations of African unity were hollow amid ongoing anti-migrant violence. and submitted a Memorandum of Demands urging stronger action against groups like Operation Dudula. In 2024, KAAX coordinated nationwide protests at RROs in Pretoria, Cape Town, Gqeberha, and Musina, alongside CoRMSA, LHR, the Scalabrini Centre, and refugee-led networks. These actions highlighted reports of asylum seekers being arrested instead of processed, calling for an end to arrests, fair access to the asylum system, and adherence to non-refoulement, demonstrating KAAX's capacity to mobilise across provinces and hold state institutions publicly accountable.

iv. Strategic Alliances: The coalition partners with human-rights organisations such as LHR, SERI, and church networks, providing emergency legal aid, shelter, and documentation support to displaced migrants. These alliances also strengthen KAAX's ability to challenge unlawful evictions, state complicity, and vigilante impunity through litigation and public accountability campaigns.

v. Pan-African Framing and Regional Linkages: KAAX explicitly identifies itself within a Pan-African and regional human-rights tradition, linking anti-xenophobia struggles in SA to wider movements across Southern Africa. It collaborates with networks such as the Southern African Migration Programme and African Diaspora Forum to promote migrant justice, freedom of movement, and regional integration. This cross-border solidarity situates KAAX within a continental effort to resist securitisation and criminalisation of migration.

vi. Framing xenophobia as part of racialised exclusion: The movement situates xenophobia within SA's broader political economy of racialised exclusion by linking it to unemployment, housing shortages, and the state's failure to deliver services. By highlighting how both migrants and poor South Africans are victims of mismanagement and corruption, KAAX reframes anti-migrant violence as a state-manufactured crisis of inequality rather than an inevitable outcome of migration.



MOBILISING TAKEAWAYS FOR SA

- ✓ Build broad, non-hierarchical coalitions with clear working groups.
- ✓ Combine protective litigation with visible street presence and education.
- ✓ Anchor anti-xenophobia in structural inequality and shared material interests.

¹⁷ KAAX <https://kaax.org.za/about-us/>

7. Conclusion and Recommendations for Migrant Rights Movement-Building in SA

South Africa's migrant-rights landscape demands a shift from reactive defence to coordinated, transformative organising. The research shows that while organisations continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, they operate within a fragmented ecosystem shaped by shrinking civic space, political hostility, and chronic resource constraints. Interviews and case studies highlight that successful movement-building requires shared goals, strategic framing, and alliances grounded in solidarity rather than narrow identity-based advocacy. Movements must embed migrant rights within broader struggles for racial, economic, and social justice, draw on existing community leaders, and strengthen collaboration across constituencies.

With these lessons in mind, the report offers the following recommendations for building a broad-based, sustainable movement for migrant rights in South Africa:

- **Reframe migrant rights as part of the broader struggle for social justice: “Freedom Charter 2.0”?**

Building a collective movement in South Africa's divided communities is challenging, but migrant exclusion is inseparable from the country's unfinished struggle against racial capitalism and structural inequality. The same divisive logics that once separated Africans, so-called “Coloureds” and Indians now pit poor Black South African citizens against African migrants. The framing and terminology of “migrant rights” was flagged as problematic and research respondents warned that it antagonises many. A social movement tackling these issues should thus emphasise how both South Africans and non-South Africans are harmed by state neglect and corruption, and frame migrant rights as part of shared struggles over housing, health care, jobs, policing, and service delivery. Thus positioning migrant justice within a broader struggle for the realisation of human rights ensures that migration is not treated as a competing issue but as integral to a collective vision of equality. A “Freedom Charter 2.0” could help anchor this inclusive moral framework.

- **Link every act of resistance to structural reform and accountability**

Moments of crisis- like xenophobic attacks or the introduction of restrictive policies- catalyse public attention and solidarity, but are typically short-lived. To sustain momentum, every act of resistance, including crisis responses, should fit and feed into a sustained campaign for structural reform. Clear pathways of accountability and specific, actionable demands that contribute towards an overarching strategic aim are key components here.

- **Harness the power of co-leadership of South Africans and migrants**

Creating broad-based, collective support requires individuals and structures that are capable of connecting migrant and South African constituencies. This way, the lived experience of migrants continues to shape agendas while harnessing the higher legitimacy and political leverage of a wider reach across communities. Safeguards such as transparent decision-making, rotational or hybrid leadership models and equitable resourcing could prevent power imbalances.

- **Build alliances with organised labour**

Migrant and citizen workers share grievances about low wages, corruption, and mismanagement. Unions- particularly in health, education, and municipal sectors- are critical yet currently peripheral allies. Reviving the tradition of labour-based solidarity central to SA's democratic history, joint campaigns could help to reframe service failures as governance issues rather than caused by the "burden" of migration. Public service unions may not be interested in advancing migrant rights per se, but they also want public institutions to be well-managed and sufficiently resourced. If channelled strategically, this provides an opportunity to create common ground.

- **Build alliances with political partners at all levels**

Both the Economic Freedom Fighters and the Democratic Alliance have publicly condemned vigilantism and xenophobia. Their positions show that opposition to xenophobic mobilisation can cross party lines, creating openings for strategic engagement on migrant rights within legislative and policy arenas. The Member of the Mayoral Committee for Health in Tshwane from the Economic Freedom Fighters has spoken out in support of the court ruling against Dudula's interference in public health facilities (1), underscoring that access to health care- regardless of nationality or documentation- is a constitutional obligation. These examples suggest that there are potential allies at multiple levels of governance who could become allies in the broader struggle for equality, dignity, and protection of migrant rights.

- **Invest in regional and continental cooperation**

Regional collaboration is essential to counter the perception that migrants are a "burden" on SA's public systems. Cost-sharing and reciprocity agreements within SADC would recognise the realities of regional mobility, acknowledge mutual benefits, and could help depoliticise debates on service access. Beyond financial cooperation, deeper engagement with regional networks across SADC and the African Union could strengthen advocacy by shared legal databases, monitoring frameworks, and policy platforms that build a united Pan-African front against xenophobia, exclusion, and securitisation. Aligning national struggles with continental human rights mechanisms also offers South African movements additional jurisprudence, solidarity, and institutional leverage. In this way, the struggle for migrant rights becomes part of a broader African project to affirm mobility, equality, and social justice.

- **Centre collective care**

Human rights activists in SA work under constant pressure and hostility, and many activists' face harassment, exhaustion, and emotional strain. For those who are migrants themselves, the pressures of organising are compounded by their own precarious status. Those who live with insecure documentation or daily discrimination face heightened risks of harassment, detention, or deportation while also carrying the emotional weight of their communities' struggles.

To be sustainable, movements need to make collective care a core part of their organising. This means building cultures that prioritise rest, safety, and mutual support, and that share responsibility rather than relying on a few individuals to carry the burden. It also means setting up practical forms of protection- legal assistance, advice, peer and solidarity networks, and spaces for recovery and debriefing- so that activists are not left isolated.

- **Provide accessible political education**



What we found again and again and again is South Africans ... who simply do not have a grasp of what migration actually means and the history and the context of migration, why people migrate. And once the people are exposed to those arguments and those realities [...] it's amazing how people's perspectives begin to shift and change
(Interview, Political Activist, December 2024).

Political education has been central to the struggles against colonialism and apartheid. Across Africa, movements employed popular education programmes to cultivate political awareness, unity, and courage among ordinary people. As Nyabola writes, without political education, “our activism remains reactionary, not radical” (2). For her, this means “thinking beyond the crisis of the moment towards the kind of future we want to have” (2).

- **Build relationships with public officials**

Constructive engagement with municipal officials and key government departments - such as Health, Home Affairs, Education, SAPS and Social Development - can strengthen accountability while building mutual trust. When movements assist officials in understanding legal obligations, improving service delivery systems, or mediating community tensions, this cooperative approach could turn adversarial relationships into partnerships rooted in shared problem-solving and respect for rights. By positioning themselves as allies who are supportive but remain critical in governance rather than outsiders, migrant rights actors could contribute to more responsive and inclusive local administrations.

A coordinated, inclusive movement for migrant justice is both possible and necessary- not only to protect migrants, but to defend constitutional values and advance dignity and rights for all who live in the country. With strategic collaboration and sustained support, the foundations that are already emerging could evolve into durable movement infrastructure capable of shaping policy, public discourse, and democratic futures firmly anchored in human rights principles. As one research respondent reminded: *“The fight is for all of us”*.

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South Africa's migrant-rights landscape demands a shift from reactive defence to coordinated, transformative organising. The research shows that while organisations continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, they operate within a fragmented ecosystem shaped by shrinking civic space, political hostility, and chronic resource constraints. Interviews and case studies highlight that successful movement-building requires shared goals, strategic framing, and alliances grounded in solidarity rather than narrow identity-based advocacy. Movements must embed migrant rights within broader struggles for racial, economic, and social justice, draw on existing community leaders, and strengthen collaboration across constituencies.

