

THE DUAL CHALLENGE TO THE AEROTROPOLIS PROJECT OF SOUTH AFRICA'S EKURHULENI METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY

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Germiston city: the seat of the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality

Background

Efforts to build an aerotropolis - a metropolitan sub-region where the layout, infrastructure, and economy are centered on an airport - near OR Tambo International Airport represent one of the city's core development and poverty alleviation initiatives. At the core of the vision of the Ekurhuleni Aerotropolis is the desire to build a more socio-economic prosperous city, where residents will benefit from the creation of new jobs, the expansion of social infrastructure, and an improvement in the standard of living for all.

Ekurhuleni was established in 2000 and is also one of the three metropolitan municipalities in the Gauteng Province. Consisting of nine towns which are further divided into 17 townships and 119 recognised informal settlements, it covers over 15.6% of Gauteng's land mass, making it the fourth largest metropolitan municipality in South Africa. Aptly termed 'Africa's Workshop', it is a commercial and manufacturing hub of South Africa and the region with an economy that contributes about 6% the GDP and approximately 18% to the total economic output of Gauteng province. The city is also the transportation hub of Southern Africa owing to its wide and modern transport, electricity and telecommunications network i.e. OR Tambo (sub-Saharan Africa's busiest airport); South Africa's largest railway hub, and a number of the country's most significant highways for passengers and freight traffic. Its economy is driven primarily by five economic sectors: finance and business services (21.9%); manufacturing (21.2%); community services (19.7%); trade (15.4%); and transport (10.9%).

The 2011 census indicates that Ekurhuleni had a resident population of approximately 3 178 470 people and 1 015 645 households, which equates to 6% of the country's population and 26% of province's population. Migration and human mobility contribute significantly to the population growth in Ekurhuleni as it represents one of the South African municipalities most transformed by migration. While cross-border movements may be the most visible and politically controversial; domestic mobility remains the most demographically and economically important migration trend.

Many cities and municipalities aim to attract highly skilled talent, tourists, and industry without considering that economic success is likely to attract and require other migrants. Negative perceptions coupled with lack of proactive migration policy (or lack of context-specific proactive measures to manage migration and human mobility in ways that maximize their benefits while minimizing their costs) threaten to derail the city socio-economic development plans; particularly the newly launched aerotropolis project. This brief outlines stakeholder's perceptions of Ekurhuleni and the policy implications that follow from them.

Methods

This brief is based on a qualitative study conducted in multiple sites in Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality from June to August 2015. The study aimed to identify pervasive popular and official perceptions of migration's effects on destination communities, and explore their origins and implications for socio-economic development in Ekurhuleni. Methods included literature review, a survey of policy and in-depth, open-ended interviews held with relevant stakeholders including municipal officials, leaders of formal and informal trade and business associations, youth organisations and faith-based organisations.

Pervasive negative popular and official perceptions

Cheap immigrant labour undermines the local labour market

Local residents, employers, representatives of labour unions and representatives of civic and faith-based organisations believed that international migrants offered cheap labour and were willing to work for long hours without requesting work-related benefits; disadvantaging locals who demanded market related salaries. Residents used this perception of migrants to account for the current high unemployment rates; ignoring evidence that the city's dynamic economy is not able to absorb the potential workforce because of low skill levels (9% of the entire Ekurhuleni adult population have no schooling). In an exceptional case, a city official perceived migrants as positive contributors to the labour market or local economy by taking up low-paying jobs that are often unwanted by locals. However, since negative perceptions of the community and lack of migration policy are mutually reinforcing, such perceptions are unlikely to result in pro-migration policies.

Migrant's entrepreneurialism impacts on job creation

The dominant view was that immigrant entrepreneurialism is illegitimate competition for local business and not job-creation. While some locals recognised that immigrants' involvement in small, informal businesses creates jobs; benefiting locals in the long run through closer and affordable essential products and services, most involved in this sector considered it 'illegitimate' competition that killed existing local businesses while others accused immigrants of stealing business space. These strong feelings against immigrants were cited as a rationale and cause of violent attacks against immigrants in many parts of the metro.

Migration impacts on local development and public resources

Interviewees held the view that immigrants are a heavy and unaffordable burden to the local resource base. Most city officials believed that most migrants moved to Ekurhuleni for improved livelihoods but when their expectations were not met, their unemployment sprawled informal settlements and strained municipal resources and social services. They saw migrants as a burden to infrastructure and service delivery such as housing, water and sanitation, electricity, health and social grants meant for a lower number of residents. Only a few local residents acknowledged the contribution of immigrants to the national resource base through direct formal sector tax, VAT and payment towards services, but the majority insisted that the economic strain they brought outweighed the benefits. They also saw remittances in a negative light; arguing that immigrants leave with locally acquired goods and money to enrich their countries.

Migration effects on social cohesion and values

There were perceptions that migration was responsible for local social maladies including crime, violence, disease, drug and substance abuse, fraud and corruption, moral degeneration and generalised lack of social cohesion. One local believed that Malawians and Nigerians cooked and sold drugs, but another was careful enough to exclude 'some Nigerians' as good people, albeit still mentioning that 'most' were drug dealers, pimps, and exploitative landlords responsible for overcrowding people in flats. In turn, local respondents inherently associated immigrant crime with unemployment since crime served as a livelihood strategy for most immigrants when they could not find employment.

Policy implications

The negative perceptions shown by interviewees are not benign, but have the potential to and indeed often translate into active discrimination, marginalization and violent exclusion of target groups. They are responsible for the city's lack of migration management policy as even the most pro-migration officials will make policies with the 'aim to please' their constituents.

The lack of proactive migration management measures is a culpable blind spot whose already visible negative socio-economic consequences will undermine the successful implementation of the aerotropolis project. The marginalisation and violent exclusion of migrants have profoundly negative developmental, socio-political and economic effects that extend beyond targeted groups and are indeed harmful to the security, social stability and socio-economic development prospects of all city residents.

Coupled together, the negative perceptions towards low and medium skilled migrants and a lack of migration policy threatens to derail Ekurhuleni's newly launched aerotropolis project by disincentivising investment.

Policy recommendations

1. Realising that Ekurhuleni's economic success is likely to attract and require poor, low-skilled migrants, there is need for proactive measures to effectively manage migration and human mobility in ways that maximise their benefits while minimising their costs. To achieve this, the city must adopt an urban planning approach that places demographic realities at its centre. The lack of such measures means that the integration and proper incorporation of the migrant labour force will not be possible and the city will continue to struggle to match infrastructure development with shifting population dynamics.
2. Because discrimination and violent exclusion create a hostile and unstable environment which is not attractive to foreign investment and human resources, plans should be made to address negative perceptions and related violent exclusion. Migrant integration should also form a crucial policy focus to create an environment where foreign investment will feel safe and well cared for.

Conclusion

Negative popular and official perceptions of migration, and not migration per se, are harmful to the city's socio-economic development prospects including in particular the aerotropolis project. The lack of migration policy or at least of context-specific and proactive migration management measures is a culpable blind spot whose already visible negative consequences will undermine the successful implementation of the city's aerotropolis project. The lack of such measures means that the city will continue to struggle to match infrastructure development with shifting population dynamics. Without adequate infrastructure, Ekurhuleni Aerotropolis will not be able to run smoothly and will not achieve its desired global competitiveness. Similarly, the lack of such measures means that integration and proper incorporation of migrant labour force will not be possible. An aerotropolis cannot function properly without a migrant labour force particularly in cities such as Ekurhuleni with serious skill shortages. Negative perceptions and lack of migration policy are two mutually reinforcing challenges that the city needs to address urgently for its socio-economic development plans and the aerotropolis project in particular to succeed.



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