

**'That violence was just the beginning...'  
VIEWS ON 'FOREIGNERS' AND THE  
MAY 2008 XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE  
AS EXPRESSED IN FOCUS GROUPS  
STAGED AT THE TIME**

by David Everatt



*The*  
**ATLANTIC**  
*Philanthropies*

**GCRRO**  
Gauteng City-Region Observatory



**S&T**  
Strategy & Tactics

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In the period April to July 2008, Strategy & Tactics was commissioned to run a series of 22 focus groups, to discuss socio-political issues. The client gave permission for the data to be re-analysed for this project, given the fact that the groups provided a fascinating window onto attitudes to xenophobia just before and after the violence broke out.

Virtually all the groups conducted prior to the May 2008 violence exhibited high levels of hostility towards 'foreigners', higher than in any previous cycle of focus groups (which have been staged in the run-up to all elections post-1994). They were usually among the first issues raised when the groups were given an open-ended question to start discussion, namely 'Let us start off talking about what has been happening in South African since the general election four years ago, in 2004. If we think about everything that is going on in the country, what are you most concerned about? What is the main issue that you think about, or talk about with your friends or family?'. The top three issues raised by groups – all the groups - were unemployment, crime and foreigners. These often intersected – participants felt that unemployment was a cause of crime and 'foreigners' were taking jobs away from South Africans; and that violent crime was brought to South Africa by 'foreigners'.

The linkages were clear – crime/foreigners, or poor service delivery/foreigners get RDP houses; or corrupt officials/foreigners bribe them; or unemployment/foreigners accept lower wages; and so on. For every negative, the link to foreigners was made by participants in the groups.

Across race and class boundaries, hostility to foreigners – to black foreigners, more specifically – was endemic. Poor service delivery and/or poverty no doubt contributed to the flash-points but there was a general level of hostility that cut right across the social fabric as evidenced by these groups. As the report shows, discourse around ‘foreigners’ linked closely to an on-going discourse about South Africa having ‘too many rights’ and becoming ‘lawless’ as a result. This in turn linked to an appalling retrospective yearning for influx control – foreigners, participants repeatedly asserted, were not the problem: it was the massive influx, the sheer number, all “sucking on the system”, that was the problem; and influx control was the solution.

Some of the anti-foreigner discourse was simply racist. Foreigners – black foreigners – were blamed for a remarkable array of social ills, summed up by a woman from Orange Farm:

*“ We don’t want these foreigners. They are taking our children’s jobs. They are the ones committing rape. Girls drink so much liquor because they are being bribed by the foreigners with money. ”*

*(African female, 50-59, Orange Farm)*

But with the racism came introspection, questions about race and identity, among black South Africans in particular. Some noted that racism has become endemic among blacks as it was amongst whites; others wondered why “we black people have a pull-down syndrome” and don’t like to see others succeed; others sounded close to despair:

*“ I don’t have hope in black people. They could change things a bit but they are corrupt. ”*

*(African female, 18-25, informal dwelling, Klieptown)*

The second set of groups was staged in July/August 2008, after the violence had receded. Here participants were asked two specific questions, whether they felt the issues that led to the xenophobic violence had been dealt with, and whether they felt the violence might recur. The xenophobic violence had not ended, as far as participants were concerned. Only one group (and not all participants in it) thought the violence had ended; every other participants and group felt it had merely quietened down but that the issues had not been resolved and neither had the violence. The obvious response is to wonder why the violence did indeed die down, if tempers were so high?

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The second phase of groups occurred after the violence and the building of camps for displaced persons. In a sad twist, the camps themselves became a focus of envy:

*I am not against foreigners....really, I have nothing against foreigners. Our government is too accommodating when it comes to foreigners. When we watch TV in our neighbours' houses we are amazed to see government providing free food for foreigners when we are also hungry but are not catered for. Government provides foreigners with free maize meal but fails to do the same for us so that we can be able to feed our children. Our children go to bed on empty stomachs on some days.*

*Government gives foreigners preferential treatment; it is too accommodating towards foreigners. Last week my children and I went to bed hungry for three days; government would not offer us any help even if we approached them for help. Government does not provide us with free maize meal.*

*(African female, 40-49, unemployed, Evaton backyard shacks)*

*I say this thing [xenophobia] will never end. They take those people even to church as if they feel pity for them - in the meantime we are suffering. We live in one-roomed houses, in the meantime they are living comfortably. These people working for the government are the ones selling these houses and these outsiders have money. They sell these houses for something like R2 000 to these foreigners. That is why these people are occupying houses that are supposed to belong to South Africans.*

*It won't end. These foreigners were chased out of their houses. Now they are told to go back to their houses and if they do and they identify the people who attacked them people will be arrested. Do you see now that this won't end?*

*(African female, 30-39, unemployed, Alexandra)*

Amongst other issues, participants wanted foreigners deported; wanted influx control to manage their entry and movement; believed foreigners bribe their way especially into RDP housing; argued that government is too soft on foreigners; Home Affairs officials in particular are open to corruption involving foreigners; and so on, a litany of anger and unhappiness.

In moments of introspection, respondents would argue that foreigners work hard while South Africans are lazy, which (they argue) will be among the reasons for violence flaring up again, as the following sequence illustrates:

*I cannot deny what she is saying; Johannesburg is filthy, there are too many of them here and that they are making Johannesburg dirty. When foreigners started flocking to South Africa we were not doing anything to uplift ourselves, we were confused and had no idea how to make money. This changed when they arrived; truly speaking they showed us means through which to make money, they gave us a light in that regard.*

*They are self-employed and are hard workers. When we saw what they were doing we soon realised that we can also do the same and make money in the process. Most of them own hair salons and plait people's hair for a fee; now we want to do the same thing which is why we don't want them here anymore. Now that we are aware that plaiting hair is a means to make money we don't want competition so we want them to go back to their countries so that we can use their ideas to make money. When they first arrived they found us doing nothing now we have realised that there are more ways to make money.*

*Yes; it is like we were blind and they have opened our eyes.*

*We are jealous.*

*They have woken us up, we were sleeping.*

*(African female, 40-49, unemployed, Mofolo/Soweto central)*

Above all, respondents – from unemployed to professionals, across all race groups – complained that foreigners accept low wages and crowd South Africans out of the labour market. Professionals complained of Zimbabwean engineers who were both talented and cheap, while others noted that foreigners would take any job at any wage, which South Africans would not do. This mingled with common complaints about both casualisation of labour and the use of labour agents

Only one group failed to raise the issue at all; and only one individual (out of the +-120 people in the first round of groups) reminded others of the positive aspects that they should be remembering, that “we need to accommodate these people because they are Africans” – but immediately went on to note that “The only thing I’m concerned about is the influx of these people”. In this context – where the best the participants could manage was a single ‘yes, but...’ – ideas about integration seem light years away from the reality on the ground.

In the period April to July 2008, Strategy & Tactics (S&T) was commissioned to run a series of focus groups, to discuss socio-political issues. The client subsequently gave permission for the data to be re-analysed for this project, given the fact that the groups provided a fascinating window onto attitudes to xenophobia just before and after the violence broke out.<sup>1</sup>

In the first phase,

*issues raised covered mood, key issues and concerns, positives and negatives, as well as perceptions of governance, registration and voter intention.*

The issue of foreigners and xenophobia were not specifically raised at any point, but emerged – often very suddenly, very strongly and very early – from the discussion among participants.

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<sup>1</sup> The client wishes to remain anonymous, but our gratitude is extended to them for their generosity.



In phase II,

*participants were specifically asked about the xenophobic violence –*

whether they thought the conditions that caused it had been resolved, and whether or not they thought the violence would recur – and this had the effect of concentrating discussion around these two questions and limiting it being aired elsewhere in the group.

Focus groups try to mimic a conversation rather than a survey, so issues are prompts rather than carefully tailored questions. The aim was to guide participants through a process of looking at the global picture and then narrowing down to their local communities and then themselves, their own (social and political) feelings and voting attitudes and so on. It was remarkable – and deeply depressing – how speedily and repeatedly the groups came to focus on foreigners as the cause of their current ills.

It is worth recalling that the groups occurred at a very low point in the national mood, with the ESKOM black-outs just beginning to peter out, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) having just completed its Polokwane conference which saw Jacob Zuma oust President Mbeki from ANC leadership, the cost of living rising, energy prices soaring, and a generally bitter mood prevailed. This may have led some participants to overstate their negativity, or others to sound more hostile or aggressive than otherwise – this is unknown, but the context should be borne in mind.

## Methodology

Focus groups are not representative. The findings presented here are at best indicative, and should not be assumed to represent the views of any broader population. That said, having analysed nearly 30 focus groups (and spoken to over 300 people), we can speak with some confidence about key issues, themes and message components. The author does draw conclusions and make suggestions based on these focus groups, though these would normally be tested against the results of a (representative) quantitative research intervention. The value of focus groups lies in their intimacy and immediacy, and the group interaction, which allows for more nuanced outputs than a traditional ‘yes/no’ survey question as well as creating an atmosphere in which people speak their minds openly.

This report analyses both ‘Phase I’ and ‘Phase II’ of the focus group research undertaken by S&T in Gauteng. The report makes no comment on whether similar views were held elsewhere in the country, or if regional differences may exist among South Africans – this is beyond the reach of the available data.

A focus group typically lasts between one and a half and two hours, with the number of participants ranging from 8 to 12. In these groups, participants were put at their ease at the beginning of the session through ‘ice breaker’ questions, having been assured about anonymity – this is why we only cite the recruitment criteria next to any quotation. Participants were served refreshments and paid an incentive for attending. The groups all took place in Johannesburg, allowing us to stage them behind a viewing mirror, so that both researchers and client could observe without affecting the research process. This is important, allowing the researchers to take account of non-verbal clues,



facial expressions, and body language, which cannot be captured in the typed transcript. It also alerted us to dominant individuals in a group, not reflected in the transcripts which do not separate one participants from another.

## Sampling

Focus groups do not include the element of randomness, so important for representivity in surveys. Respondents are selected to meet pre-determined criteria, as proposed by the client. The table below sets out the recruitment criteria for the different groups.

*Table 1: Recruitment criteria (Phase I)*

Age	Race	Sex	Status	Location
18-25	African	Male	Students	Johannesburg inner city formal
36-49	African	Male	Mixed	Alexandra, formal
26-35	African	Male	Unemployed	Ivory Park, informal
36-49	African	Female	Employed (white collar)	Johannesburg suburbs/city, formal
18-25	African	Female	Unemployed	Kliptown, informal
50-59	African	Female	Mixed	Orange Farm
36-49	Coloured	Female	Unemployed	Bosmont
60+	Coloured	Female	Mixed	Eldorado Park
36-49	Indian	Male	Employed	Mayfair
50-59	Indian	Female	Mixed	Lenasia
26-35	White	Male	Employed	West Rand
18-25	White	Female	Students	Johannesburg

In phase II, the focus shifted to African participants

*Table 2: Recruitment criteria (Phase II)*

Age	Race	Sex	Status	Location
20-29	African	Male	Unemployed	Vosloorus
30-39	African	Male	Unemployed	Rabie Ridge Informal settlement
30-39	African	Male	Employed	Cosmo City
40-49	African	Male	Employed (professional)	Johannesburg suburbs/city, formal
40-49	African	Male	Unemployed	Soweto
20-29	African	Female	Employed	Kliptown, informal
30-39	African	Female	Unemployed	Alexandra
30-39	African	Female	Unemployed	Zola/Jabulani
40-49	African	Female	Employed (professional)	Cosmo City
40-49	African	Female	Unemployed	Mofolo/Soweto central
30-39	African	Male	Employed	Evaton formal
40-49	African	Female	Unemployed	Evaton backyard shack
40-49	African	Male	Unemployed	Olievenhoutbosch informal
30-39	African	Female	Employed	Olievenhoutbosch informal

## Analysis

Word-for-word translated transcripts and notes taken while viewing the groups were used during analysis. Findings are thematically grouped and analysed; the report makes liberal use of quotation to allow the reader to get a first-hand sense of the groups and the way in which issues were discussed. Quotations have been selected for their representivity, not necessarily because they are the most dramatic or extreme version of any particular viewpoint.

## Structure of this report

The report is broadly divided into two sections, following the sequence of the groups themselves. The first section is thematically divided, while the second is more focused on the specific questions asked about xenophobia, namely has it been dealt with and will the violence return?

## Xenophobia and the first phase of focus groups (April/May 2008)

**T**he focus groups began with introductions, followed by a broad, open-ended question: 'Let us start off talking about what has been happening in South African since the general election four years ago, in 2004. If we think about everything that is going on in the country, what are you most concerned about? What is the main issue that you think about, or talk about with your friends or family?'

The responses were unremarkable in many ways – unemployment, crime, the rising cost of living, the ESKOM blackouts, complaints about service delivery and the like were all aired. But what was surprising – growing to be shocking as the groups rolled out and the issue was repeated, seemingly with more heat on each occasion – was the high level of xenophobia evident across virtually every participant in every group. Previous focus groups, staged at a similar moment in the electoral cycle and in the national mood cycle, had also seen flashes of xenophobic sentiment, and warnings had been made about the dangers that a populist politician could do with such public sentiment.

But 2008 was quite different: the strength of feeling, the depth of anger, and the refusal to step back from the visceral edge of what was being said, marked the year out as worryingly exceptional – before the violence began. For example, in the male group from Alexandra, the opening words of the first speaker in response to the opening question were:

*“ Foreigners. If they could take them back to their homes things would be better. Foreigners get RDP houses and we have to pay loans. ”*

This was immediately followed by the second speaker:

*“ Foreigners are all over in our country. When South Africans were in exile they were kept in camps and were being monitored unlike foreigners here who are roaming around freely. ”*

*(African male, 36-49, mixed employment status, formal dwellings, Alexandra)*

From the very first words ‘foreigners’ are made the primary concern, mixed with ‘send them home’ messages, incorrect history, and the notion that foreigners are animalistic – they are ‘roaming around freely’ where they should be ‘kept in camps and ... monitored’. This set of views percolated the research.

But Alexandra became a flashpoint of violence, so it may reasonably be objected that quoting from that area is inappropriate. Let’s look at other groups from other areas. For African women from Orange Farm, foreigners were the second issue as well:

*“ My main worry is the influx of foreigners. They come to live here and 2010 is not far... If only the borders could be closed so that only legal people can go through and go back home after conducting their business here. ”*

Another from the same group added:

*“ Foreigners are my main concern. Our kids struggle to get IDs but not foreigners. Male foreigners have IDs with female numbers. They marry our women and we don’t even know. ”*

*(African female, 50-59, Orange Farm informal, mixed employment status)*

The reader can see the language of controlled movement, of ‘acceptable’ or ‘legal’ foreigners versus the illegals – but even legally permitted foreigners need to depart ‘after conducting their business here’.

An equally worrying theme, which we return to below, is the way in which the language and practices of the past have been adopted by participants as solutions for the present. The former victims of apartheid’s influx control and attempt to animalise black South Africans and restrict them to orderly movement from one prescribed area to another, conducting their business (in urban areas) and then returning (to rural Bantustans) while treating them as potential criminals who were guilty until

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proven innocent through producing a 'dompas', has been internalised and by 2008 had become the language of those enfranchised by post-apartheid democracy.

There was also the oft-repeated issue of foreigners bribing officials for services – whether RDP houses or IDs and so on – and 'taking our women', whether by hook or crook. As one woman commented,

*“ We don't want these foreigners. They are taking our children's jobs. They are the ones committing rape. Girls drink so much liquor because they are being bribed by the foreigners with money. ”*

*(African female, 50-59, Orange Farm)*

A student from the inner city of Johannesburg was equally blunt (although the issue was raised later than in many other groups, and not taken up by others in the group):

*“ What I think is wrong is when they allow foreigners to live in the country. These people mess things up, they rob, and employers prefer them because they accept any amount of wages. ”*

*(African male, 18-25, student, inner city Johannesburg)*

The message is clear: foreigners are not welcome. Among African men from Ivory Park, the issues were unemployment, housing, crime and:

*“ Another problem is that of foreigners. There are many of them. We don't know who is to blame for house-breaking but I think they are the ones doing that. ”*

*(African males, 26-35, Ivory Park, informal dwelling, unemployed)*

Among professional African women living in previously 'white' suburbs, the first concern was crime, immediately followed by the second speaker who noted:

*“ Over and above crime we've got serious issues of foreigners. Their incredible influx into the country right now. ”*

*(African women, 36-49, professional, formal, Johannesburg suburbs).*

If there was a notable point in this opening section of the first phase of the focus groups, it was that on the one hand, African participants exhibited the strongest degree of racism against 'foreigners'. A white participant observed that

*“ Now with all the Nigerians coming over the borders, you know, you walk in Randburg – I can take you to twenty places in Randburg, you can't move there, it's Nigerian-infested, fifty Nigerians approach your car. For drugs. ”*

*(White male, 26-35, West Rand, employed).*

But whites were more concerned with domestic issues, with Black Economic Empowerment, Affirmative Action, corruption and the like. The group of coloured women from Bosmont was the only group not to make a single reference to ‘foreigners’, while also noting their own position of relative weakness (‘we were too black under apartheid and we’re too white now’, as one woman put it). One Indian woman (the group was recruited from Lenasia) made a passing reference to government having given “them rights to liver and so now they are permanent and they feel that they are owed” – the ungrateful native stereotype – and Indian men made a couple of references to Zimbabweans - “there are between three and five million foreigners in our country, you cannot blame them because of the political situation [in Zimbabwe]” – but nothing more. All however commented on BEE, affirmative action, and their own feelings of alienation and displacement in South Africa.

Among the ‘minority groups’, as whites, coloureds and Indians are euphemistically referred to, it can be argued that racist sentiments – and/or fear of racism coupled with power directed at themselves by black South Africans – was the primary issue, leaving little space for xenophobic sentiment. Moreover, there was no need for xenophobia. None were living cheek by jowl with foreigners, competing for jobs, houses, opportunities, openings – the on-going fall-out of unequal discrimination in the past continuing to echo through present-day South Africa. While those with economic power were able to live apart from African ‘foreigners’ and see them as irritants (drug sellers) or pity them (those poor Zimbabweans), black South Africans – with political but not economic power – lived in direct contact with non-South Africans, competed with them for jobs and services, and by early 2008 had come to see them as the source of many of the ills that plagued their own lives.

“I’m not xenophobic”, one white collar African woman from the suburbs intoned, “but given the circumstances we can all see that we are going to the dogs”. The problem, as her group saw it, was that then President Mbeki “has said that Zimbabweans are here and we have to deal with that” – but the danger was that South Africa would end up like the rest of Africa, “appalling ... We have the best of everything”. The notion of dark hordes swarming in from darkest Africa, reducing South Africa to ‘just another African country’ sounds like it could have been spoken by a stereotypical white South African – about any black African. But these attitudes have percolated deep into the fabric of South Africa, not necessarily driven by class – the attitudes were shared across income, education and employment status boundaries. The failure to adequately acknowledge or even fully understand the damage done to the collective psyche by apartheid’s dehumanising of blacks remains alive and with us today.

Hostility to foreigners was often accompanied by some form of introspection – they’re better than us, it’s our fault we’re poor, and so on – as well as a sense of powerlessness, that the state would not help people in their competition for resources with foreigners. This was coupled to and reinforced by the recycling of colonial stereotypes – ‘cunning’ and bribing blacks ‘streaming’ into South Africa, who come one after the other – let one in and look what happens – and also linked to self-pitying notions of ‘it’s not our fault’. When such a range of emotions, perceptions and stereotypes intertwine, it self-evidently cuts down the possible solutions. The following sequence, taken from a group of African women from Orange Farm, makes the point:

- R: Orange Farm is full of foreigners.*
- R: That is their territory. Even if you can report them when they enter your home at night, when will the police come?*
- R: When you expect the police to come they tell you they can't because they don't have cars to transport them.*
- R: And the lots of shacks there ...*
- R: Where have you ever heard of one police station for such a lot of people?*
- R: And the stands that these foreigners have belong to our kids in Soweto who are supposed to come and occupy them. They don't know who hires them out to the foreigners and gets paid to do so, by the foreigners.*
- R: And we South Africans are not truthful. Say, I have a place, then I have a boyfriend who has a place too. So I hire my place out to foreigners instead of giving it out or try to help those people (South Africans) who need a place to stay.*
- R: It is because of poverty. You know that when you hire it out to foreigners you are going to get money, since there is no money in the house.*
- R: Our children are at home, not working. When they get into the house they find nothing to eat. No sugar, no mielie meal. When they get out of the house the only thing they think of doing is to commit crime and nothing else.*
- R: And when these foreigners come to you to hire a site he comes alone. But as soon as you give him more of them come to sleep there. You think you have hired out to one person but a lot of them live there. They live there in shifts. Everyone of them has a turn to sleep there.*
- R: These people look after one another.*
- R: And they are the ones doing so much crime in our country.*
- R: And when we hold a meeting telling the block councillor about this problem they promise to deal with it, instead of taking the people at the meeting to where there is a stand occupied by foreigner to evict them or find out how they got the stand. No, the councillors push it under the carpet.*

*(African women, 50-59, Orange Farm, mixed employment status)*



The 'solutions' proposed by different participants were basic and directly echoed our apartheid past. Black Africans were the new 'oorstroming', needing to be controlled through influx control measures. Borders needed to be closed, corrupt officials who took their bribes harshly dealt with, and only 'law abiding' foreigners should be allowed to stay – the rest needed to be removed. Or worse – "If we could work together ... we could fight off these foreigners and drive them home," one participant from Alexandra mused aloud.

Their prowling, preying on 'our women', selling drugs to 'our children', their taking of 'our houses', all seemed to reflect a sense of powerlessness – foreigners were 'clever' or 'brilliant' or 'highly educated' (according to different participants) and were therefore able to get what they wanted at the expense of honest hard-working but ultimately disempowered South Africans. Hindsight makes it easy to see how this cauldron of swirling emotions and prejudices could be triggered easily into violence, but the other case studies will hopefully shed more light on the actual trigger incidents – this report provides a brief snapshot of how people were feeling just before (and just after) the violence, and as the preceding pages and quotations suggest, xenophobic violence was indeed waiting to happen, needing only a trigger event to be unleashed.

## Too many rights

Hostility to 'foreigners' intersected with a number of other discourses, which we briefly turn to. One was a conservative set of attitudes – widely held by participants of all races – that saw the post-apartheid dispensation as giving 'too many rights', such as rights for girl children over their bodies, the rights of children not to suffer corporal punishment (bewailed by virtually every group), the absence of the death penalty and so on.

*Basically, our constitution has a lot of loop-holes. Everybody has a right to everything.*

*(African females, 36-49, Johannesburg suburbs, white collar)*

And the problem with this:

*A foreigner who has just arrived in the country yesterday will tell you that he has rights. You can't tell him anything... So, it makes no difference whether I'm South African. He is whatever he is. We all have the same rights. They are just sucking on our system.*

*(African females, 36-49, Johannesburg suburbs, white collar)*

Others looked longingly over the border to Botswana, where a South African had recently been given the death sentence, attended by much publicity:

*If the death penalty is reintroduced, crime will be reduced. In Botswana there is discipline because they keep to the rules.*

*(African males, 18-26, students, inner city Johannesburg)*

Again the themes emerge – a society of libertines, lacking discipline – or self-discipline – and cunning foreigners taking advantage of it, 'cheeky native' foreigners assuming equality with locals, and a hankering after past forms of rough justice. In the light of an uncertain and gloomy present, the past had taken on a sickly attractive lure for many focus group participants. More worrying was the association between human rights and the inability of citizen or state to act against illegality – especially where, participants would remind us, we all know who the criminals are:

*...in South Africa statistically a woman is raped, a child is killed, cars have been hi-jacked every minute. Foreigners do all these things.*

*(African male, 36-49, mixed employment status, formal dwellings, Alexandra)*

## Introspection I: 'Tina u darkies'

Among the more notable impacts of these attitudes was to force on participants a degree of introspection, which usually began with a participant saying 'Tina u darkies...' ('us blacks') and then explaining some fault of black South Africans that had allowed the situation to develop. Some revealed the lingering impact of racist stereotypes generated by whites:

*[Whites] never used to expose one another. We are very quick to stab each other.*

*We black people have a pull-down syndrome. Whites ate and kept quiet.*

*(African females, 36-49, Johannesburg suburbs, white collar)*

Whites, in this view, were as morally questionable as blacks – all were 'eating' – but were more supportive of their own kind. Whites were smarter, blacks

Others had more extreme and pessimistic views:

*I don't have hope in black people. They could change things a bit but they are corrupt.*

*Old people say it was better to be governed by the boers because a boer can think for a black person. During the apartheid era people used to be employed and were able to get jobs. There was food, too. Now it's difficult to get a job. It's very hard. All the white people have left with their investments. They've gone to America.*

*That's why I say the mind of a black person is like that. A white person would never let you go if he finds you drinking and driving. A white policeman or a white metro policeman will never just let you go freely if he finds you breaking the law. Never.*

*(African females, 18-26, unemployed, informal dwelling, Kliptown)*

But the same group, in the following sequence, showed how introspection, the prevalence of old stereotypes, hankering after an authoritarian past and mistrust of foreigners can intersect:

*// R: A black [policeman] will ask you to give him R20.00 and let you go.*

*R: It's not that white people were not corrupt. It's just that they are united. They don't sell each other out in a way. Do you understand what I mean? Whites work together hand in hand.*

*R: Do we tell on each other?*

*R: Yes, we do.*

*R: A person gives you R20.00 and doesn't have a licence but you let him go?*

*R: I don't deny that.*

*R: You know, a policeman will come to you in a car, seeing that you are jolly and ask you for R20.00 or R50.00. We just search our pockets and give him. We are used to that in the township.*

*R: But here in town you'll never see that happening.*

*R: Do you see how much drugs the Nigerians sell. Black policemen are their friends. //*

The sequence ends with Nigerians (in this case) conveniently providing the scapegoat for the corrupt officials, the corrupt behaviour (offering bribes to police) and the failure of blacks to stand united unlike their former oppressors. At the heart of much of it was a lingering set of self doubts, summarised by one participant, talking about black South Africans, as: "We people like to abuse authority" (African male, 26-35, Ivory Park). The link back to the previous theme, of 'too many rights' and the desire for a more authoritarian state to intervene and resolve moral and social dilemmas, is clear.

# Part

# IV

# THE AFTERMATH

In May 2008, xenophobic violence flared across Gauteng, leaving some 70 people dead, themselves a mixture of South Africans and 'foreigners'. Ethnicity – targeting 'Shangaans' – as well as xenophobia were visible. A second phase of focus groups was staged between July and August 2008 (see above for recruitment criteria). 'Foreigners' did come up spontaneously in a couple of groups, as part of the opening question, but far less frequently than in the first phase, and with far more circumspection as well. The time for extreme views, it seemed, was over.

Until, that is, the moderator asked two direct questions – has the violence ended and have the issues related to it been resolved; and will the violence recur? Once respondents were given licence to discuss xenophobia, a range of views poured out. "Those people are killing our nation", an African male from Soweto told his group. A fellow participant agreed: "Nigerians are here to destroy our country". Any notion that the violence was some form of catharsis was rapidly dispelled. Rather, participants from different groups explained, it was merely the first outbreak – "It is definitely coming back," "There is so much crime because of these people," "This situation was not solved in the first place; there is always tension because some South Africans want foreigners to return to their countries but some foreigners say they are here to stay," "It is only a question of when it will happen, not whether or not it will happen".

Most participants – not all – agreed that the 'problem' had not been resolved; that xenophobia remained alive and well; and that the violence would recur.

## Continuities: “I think foreigners are to blame for all the problems that we are experiencing”

Some themes remained constant. One was the introspective search for fault, and the conclusion that:

*“ We have to admit that South Africans are lazy and then we blame foreigners who work hard for R50.*

*I am not going to deny that South Africans are lazy – one wants to earn R5000 as a cleaner, and why is that? Foreigners will do the same job for a lot less. We will lose out to foreigners because we want to compare ourselves to professionals and when challenged we always bring up the issue of rights.*

*(African females, 20-29, informal dwellings, Klieptown)*

Lazy or inadequate black South Africans, too many rights, hard-working and smart foreigners – the violence in many respects threw into sharp relief the sentiments and feelings (and insecurities) expressed by groups prior to the May 2008 outbreak. Three young women from Klieptown exemplified the point:

*R: I am sure that the xenophobic attacks are still going to happen because it is clear that some people are not happy with the fact they are still here. At the train station for an example foreigners are ill-treated by some people simply because they are foreigners. It is easy for South Africans to spot foreigners in their midst because of the way they dress and the way they conduct themselves; I have to admit that their fashion sense is different to ours which makes it easy to identify them. In the trains some people unashamedly call them amakwerekwere; this is not right because it hurts them, they do have feelings like we do. It hurts them when they are taunted and called names simply because they are foreigners. Xenophobia is still a problem; it has not stopped.*

*R: I also don't think that xenophobia has stopped because there is a tendency to look down on foreigners and people accuse them of taking their jobs. South Africans blame foreigners for the problem of unemployment. In general South Africans are lazy whereas foreigners are willing to do any job in order to be able to provide for their families.*

*The minute they make money and are able to do things for themselves the locals become jealous and begrudge them their success. I am waitress and I work with foreigners who work 24 hours as cleaners, a job which many South Africans don't want to do but as soon as they see that there is money to be made as a cleaner they become jealous and beat the foreigners.*

*R: In my opinion it will end as long Tsvangirai and Mugabe are willing to sit down and reach an amicable solution to their problems. After doing that they must call back all their people from the squatter camps and stop those who perpetrate the violence. South Africans are stupid because they are killing foreigners at the command of some people somewhere for a lousy R100. Not all South Africans undermine foreigners; in fact you will find most of us consider them human like we are as compared to the few who think foreigners are less human than we are.*

*(African female, 20-29, informal dwelling, Kliptown, employed)*

The 'third force' argument – initially raised by some state officials but dropped quite quickly once the violence spread – appears here in a form quite often noted by participants, namely that the violence was being stoked by agents of ZANU-PF and Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, at the time locked in a fierce battle with opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

It also sharpened the focus on the state. The second phase of groups occurred after the violence and the building of camps for displaced persons. In a sad twist, the camps themselves became a focus of envy:

*I am not against foreigners...really, I have nothing against foreigners. Our government is too accommodating when it comes to foreigners. When we watch TV in our neighbours' houses we are amazed to see government providing free food for foreigners when we are also hungry but are not catered for. Government provides foreigners with free maize meal but fails to do the same for us so that we can be able to feed our children. Our children go to bed on empty stomachs on some days.*

*Government gives foreigners preferential treatment; it is too accommodating towards foreigners. Last week my children and I went to bed hungry for three days; government would not offer us any help even if we approached them for help. Government does not provide us with free maize meal.*

*(African female, 40-49, unemployed, Evaton backyard shacks)*

The point was made again by two young African women from Zola:

*“ R: Housing officials are corrupt because they give RDP houses to people who don't even have C-forms and this feeds the whole xenophobia cycle. Government officials cause corruption, especially those from the housing department - they give RDP houses to people who pay bribery and leave rightful owners of RDP houses who applied a long time ago without houses. You are guaranteed a house if you can pay R5000 on the spot to a corrupt housing official. This what causes all this fighting between South Africans and foreigners.*

*R: True: people who are poor lose their houses to people who have money to bribe these greedy officials; it does not matter how long they have been on the waiting list. I don't think xenophobia can be eradicated because our officials are greedy and corrupt. Government has deported many foreigners but they will be back soon because they know that they can pay for entry into our country. Our politicians and officials are corrupt they take money from foreigners in order to line their own pockets. Mbeki and Mugabe are friends so do you really think that there will be no foreigners or corruption here?* ”

*(African females, 26-35, Zola)*

Again, a link to then President Mbeki's openness to Africa as a causal factor, linked also to Mugabe and Zimbabwean immigrants; and to corrupt officials in South Africa duping the poor. Xenophobia for some was simple racism; for others, as these and other quotations suggest, it emerged from a complex interweaving of issues and challenges of everyday life.

The state had let down black South Africans prior to the violence through corruption – allowing foreigners to bribe their way into RDP houses and IDs, out of the clutches of the police, into fraudulent marriages with local women and so on – and continued to do so. Displaced immigrants were now the South African equivalent of 'cappucino refugees', treated with kid gloves and given resources that South Africans were denied. The victims – murder and theft and loss of belongings and trust notwithstanding – were the 'winners', South Africans the losers.

*“ I say this thing [xenophobia] will never end. They take those people even to church as if they feel pity for them - in the meantime we are suffering. We live in one-roomed houses, in the meantime they are living comfortably. These people working for the government are the ones selling these houses and these outsiders have money. They sell these houses for something like R2 000 to these foreigners. That is why these people are occupying houses that are supposed to belong to South Africans.*



*It won't end. These foreigners were chased out of their houses. Now they are told to go back to their houses and if they do and they identify the people who attacked them people will be arrested. Do you see now that this won't end?*

*(African female, 30-39, unemployed, Alexandra)*

And the local state was also more clearly targeted for comment. As one participant put it:

*It is coming from the [top], and it is coming down. Councillors are looking at xenophobia, but people want to know how do foreigners get houses allocated to them, prior to the locals? This is why the locals are so upset.*

*(African males, 40-49, unemployed, Soweto)*

Whether local or national, politician or official, the state was widely criticised for causing the problem in the first place, allowing it to grow, and then (as some saw it) helping 'foreigners' more than locals – while corrupt officials continued their corrupt ways. "It is not solved yet", a male participant from Soweto told his group: "Our government has been soft towards the foreigners." In this context, it is scarcely surprising that the official response, of re-integrating displaced people into communities, was met with little enthusiasm and whose failure was widely predicted. Asked about reintegration, African men from Olievenhoutsbosch made the following observations:

*R: Unemployed citizens don't have food to eat but foreigners are sure that they are going to get three meals a day; they are provided with breakfast, lunch and supper whereas we have to struggle on our own to feed our families. Government is using the taxpayers' money to feed foreigners at the expense of its people.*

*R: I don't think that the xenophobic attacks will never happen again; it is going to take maybe ten years to address the various issues surrounding foreigners, xenophobia will take a long time to be addressed in South Africa. Government is talking about reintegrating foreigners back to the communities that chased them away in the first instance. These people are not originally from South Africa; they come from various countries, I think that the only solution is for government to deport them back to their countries. The government must commit itself to taking these people back to their own countries; that is where they belong.*

*R: Government must introduce a system through which it will control foreigners because at the moment they come and go as they please. Foreigners are taking our jobs and houses from us; most of them own houses and businesses in the township. They can afford to do all these things because they are employed whereas we are unable to afford the basic things.*

*R: Foreigners can afford to buy stands and build houses because they have jobs.*

*R: I want to add something; every foreigner who is employed has robbed a South African of that job and every foreigner who does not work commits crime.*



*(African males, 40-49, Olievenhoutsbosch, unemployed, informal)*

Put more simply: nothing had changed.

## Introspection II

We saw earlier how xenophobia was often accompanied by or led to different forms of introspection, in many instances accompanied by a re-appearance of old stereotypes and attitudes. After the violence the introspection continued. Respondents would often argue that foreigners worked hard while South Africans were lazy, which (they argued) would be among the reasons for violence flaring up again, as the following sequence illustrates:

*// R: Johannesburg is filthy, there are too many of them here and that they are making Johannesburg dirty. When foreigners started flocking to South Africa we were not doing anything to uplift ourselves, we were confused and had no idea how to make money. This changed when they arrived; truly speaking they showed us means through which to make money, they gave us a light in that regard.*

*R: They are self-employed and are hard workers. When we saw what they were doing we soon realised that we can also do the same and make money in the process. Most of them own hair salons and plait people's hair for a fee; now we want to do the same thing which is why we don't want them here anymore. Now that we are aware that plaiting hair is*

*a means to make money we don't want competition so we want them to go back to their countries so that we can use their ideas to make money. When they first arrived they found us doing nothing now we have realised that there are more ways to make money.*

*R: Yes; it is like we were blind and they have opened our eyes.*

*R: We are jealous.*

*R: They have woken us up, we were sleeping.*



*(African female, 40-49, unemployed, Mofolo/Soweto central)*

Another participant made the point thus:

*The problem starts with the communities competing with the foreigners. The foreigner starts achieving more and the communities realise these foreigners are getting so much more yet they don't belong here!*



*(African males, 20-29, Vosloorus, unemployed)*

And, finally, a man told the same group that

*I think it will happen again in the township because most guys are unemployed and they see this xenophobia as a chance of making money. It has now become a crime because these guys are robbing these foreigners of their belongings.*



These are more frank assessment than many others, not trying to dress up the issue in blaming evil foreigners, third forces or other factors. They reflect a point made in some other groups, namely that patience with hard-working entrepreneurial foreigners had expired, and South Africans wanted what they felt was 'theirs' – the post-apartheid dividend needed to be claimed by South Africans, not foreigners. Given the extent of looting that accompanied the violence, and the attacks in particular on foreign entrepreneurs, the initial sequence (women from Soweto) may help us understand the thinking occurring at the time.

But let us not lose sight of the racist assumptions that underlie such attitudes, as the following quotation makes clear:

*I think the xenophobic violence was caused by the government because in the end the government is not handling the influx of immigrants, both for asylum or economic purposes well. If foreigners want refugee status that is where you involve the United Nations and Red Cross to accommodate these people. Not for them to just come into the country and go into the mainstream of our society. And they are doing a lot of havoc. They take our children and turn them into prostitutes. Give them drugs. How far should South Africans be tolerant that is my question. I'm not saying xenophobic violence is okay. But how far should we be tolerant to a situation where our children are being made sex slaves. I don't say all of them are doing it but if 20 of 30 in a group of people are perceived to be involved in criminal activities, there the group itself is perceived to be involved in criminal activities.*

*(African male, 40-49, city/suburbs, professional)*

Some were led to more humane conclusions. A young woman from Kliptown reminded her group that “You must not forget that they too are human. They came here to find peace because the situation back home is not peaceful. They deserve to lead peaceful lives.” Others were still struggling with the issue, as the following sequence suggests:

*R: I think that Zimbabweans have to go back to their country.*

*R: Me too.*

*R: I think that they should stay.*

*R: What for? They do have a country to go back to.*

*R: You must not forget that they too are human; they came here to find peace because the situation back home is not peaceful. They deserve to live peaceful lives.*

*R: I agree; there is too much suffering in their country at the moment.*

*R: You might have to seek refuge in another country some day; do you ever consider that?*

*R: True; they are here to seek a better life and jobs.*

- R: *During apartheid we did not have it easy but we stayed here and persevered.*
- R: *Some South Africans left the country during apartheid and went to other countries to seek refuge on a temporary basis and they were not ill-treated during their stay in these countries. Why do we ill-treat foreigners? They are our brothers and sisters we should not mistreat them; we are hurting them.*
- R: *They are not our brothers.*
- R: *They are.*
- R: *No, they are not.*
- R: *They are Africans and so are we; we should help each other.*
- R: *No, no.*
- R: *They are human like we are; why do we have to hurt them when they are here to work for their families?*
- R: *You have to understand that it is not only Zimbabweans who are here.*
- R: *I know that there are people from Botswana, Mozambique and other countries but why were the xenophobic attacks targeted at Zimbabweans?*
- R: *That's true.*
- R: *They like us are human and we should not forget that. They need love and we have to be hospitable.*



*(African females, 20-29, Kliptown informal, employed)*

The sequence in some ways illustrates a national dialogue that has yet to occur, in which civil society could play a key role, where South Africans have to open up about their perceptions and prejudices, think them through, and remember the humanity of those they are discussing – and hopefully reach the same conclusion as the last respondent in the sequence above.

That said, participants in the focus groups reached one conclusion that was generalised across all the second phase of groups – that the issues at stake were jobs and houses, and that the violence would recur.

**H**indsight is a perfect science. And an irritating one. But the data analysed in this paper strongly suggest that temperatures were running extremely high in early May 2008, and anyone tracking xenophobic attitudes – or doing socio-political research generally – would have noticed the spike in hostile attitudes and tough talk. This stood out to S&T even though we do these pre-election focus groups only every few years. And that in turn suggests a significant break in the chain from research to informing citizens and political leaders or civil society organisations. The violence is widely depicted as ‘erupting suddenly’ – though this report suggests we can question how ‘sudden’ or ‘spontaneous’ this was.

The violence seems to have led some to question previously held assumptions and stereotypes, suggesting that there is space for a broader, national dialogue and healing process. That this has to go back to colonial and apartheid era stereotypes and the way these have impacted on current consciousness – of all races – is made clear by the findings. This again is something that civil society should be a key player in.

Finally, however, we should all take heed of the very dark underlining to this report, namely the widely held conviction among participants that the issues that led to the outbreak of violence have

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not been addressed, and that the violence will occur again. We end with the rather chilling views of two men from Soweto:

*R: People have been stopped from attacking foreigners. They are relaxing and waiting to see what the government is going to do to address their problems. If government does not address the grievances of South Africans, people are going to resort to violence.*

*R: Yes and they were very lucky that the xenophobic attacks did not occur in Soweto. They should consider themselves lucky because if it had happened in Soweto things would be bad currently. [Because] when Soweto sneezes the whole country catches a cold.*

*(African males, 40-49, Soweto, unemployed)*