Addressing the marginalisation of refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa

Summary

Refugees and asylum seekers constitute one of the most vulnerable communities in South Africa. Despite legal protections and the efforts of pro-immigrant non-profit groups, this community is frequently exploited, marginalised and demonised in daily life. This problem seems to have worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the country struggles to deal with this deadly disease, refugee advocacy groups have called on the state to address the day-to-day ostracism with which refugees and asylum seekers are faced. If South Africa wants to honour its international and regional commitments to refugee protection, then the government needs to address widespread public hostility towards this at-risk community.

To address a problem adequately, it is first necessary to understand it. Currently, not much is known about how ordinary citizens in South Africa see refugees, and this has undermined efforts to address the problem. To bridge this knowledge gap, attitudes and behaviours towards refugees are examined in this policy brief, using contemporary data from Ipsos (Ipsos South Africa 2019). The brief offers a targeted set of recommendations to assist policymakers in building effective programmes to assist refugees. Shifting public attitudes should be part of a broader strategy to address the root causes of anti-immigrant prejudice. Consequently, the recommendations outlined will cover not only effective communication interventions, but also proposals for targeted immigrant integration programmes.

Introduction

Asylum seekers and refugees are protected by the Refugees Act (No. 130 of 1998). If classified as a refugee, an individual receives the right to work and travel. Grantees are also entitled to social welfare benefits (including medical care and access to education) and in time are able to apply for permanent residence. According to the United Nations, there were some 280 004 refugees in communities spread throughout the country in 2019, of which 189 491 were asylum seekers and 90 513 had official refugee status (UNHCR 2020). This represents a small proportion of the nation's international migrant stock (6.6% of the total in 2019) and an even smaller percentage (0.5%) of the national population.

Refugee legislation in South Africa has, traditionally, been amongst the most progressive on the African continent. It emerged through incremental agreements with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in the early 1990s and was centred on safeguarding human rights (see Handmaker et al. 2013 for a review of this process). However, there has been growing criticism from civil society (both domestic and international) about the failure of the state to protect the refugee community. The asylum management system was described as 'fatefully' inadequate by an Amnesty International South Africa (2019) report. Insufficient procedures leave hundreds of thousands of refugee applicants vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment. In January 2020, restrictive amendments to the Refugee Act exacerbated the existing level of criticism.

Data

Ipsos conducted a survey of the adult population in four of South Africa's nine provinces: Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape and Gauteng. This collective is referred to in this policy brief as the 'LKWG' cluster. Why was this cluster of four provinces selected? The four represent a good cross-section of the nation, containing a diverse (in terms of economic, racial and linguistic variation) population. In addition, most of the refugee and asylum seeker population reside in these four provinces. The survey was collected at the household level with fieldworkers conducting face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire was translated into multiple South African languages and (where appropriate) was conducted in the home language of the respondent. The sample was restricted to adults (18 years or older) living in private households. After cleaning, the Ipsos sample contained 2 004 respondents. Benchmark weights were applied to ensure that the data are representative at the provincial level and all data presented in this brief are weighted.

Stereotypes and scapegoating

To better understand refugee stereotypes in the LKWG population, it is instructive to look at whether people attributed a list of negative and positive traits to this community (see Figure 1). About half the populace believed that refugees were dishonest and 37% told fieldworkers that they were violent. A majority (57%) of the population thought that people from this community took jobs that belonged to native-born citizens. Less than one-third (32%) of the general LKWG populace said that refugees could be described as good. Further statistical testing found that an individual was more likely to believe that refugees were job-stealers if they also believed that this group was dishonest, different and violent. This seems to suggest quite a hostile view of those seeking asylum in South Africa and confirms prior public opinion research towards refugees in the post-apartheid period (Gordon 2016).

The kind of stereotypes outlined above are without empirical justification and demonstrate the degree to which refugees are ostracised. Many people, unfortunately, use these stereotypes to make judgments about refugees. Two-thirds of the LKWG population, for instance, thought that many refugees lied about why they were here, and were trying to take advantage of South Africa. Regrettably, people operated in friendship networks that did not challenge their views on refugees. Only a fifth of the public reported that their friends had a dissimilar opinion from them about this group. This kind of attitudinal homophily was more apparent amongst those with strong anti-refugee views.

Attitudes towards refugees were found to correlate with public attitudes about other types of migrants. If an individual held anti-refugee views, then he/she was also more likely to display antagonism towards cross-border migrants. Consequently, the results depicted in Figure 1 are not surprising. Existing public opinion research by Gordon (2017) has documented a persistent public discourse around immigration as a driver of violence, poverty and immorality (see also Gordon 2020).
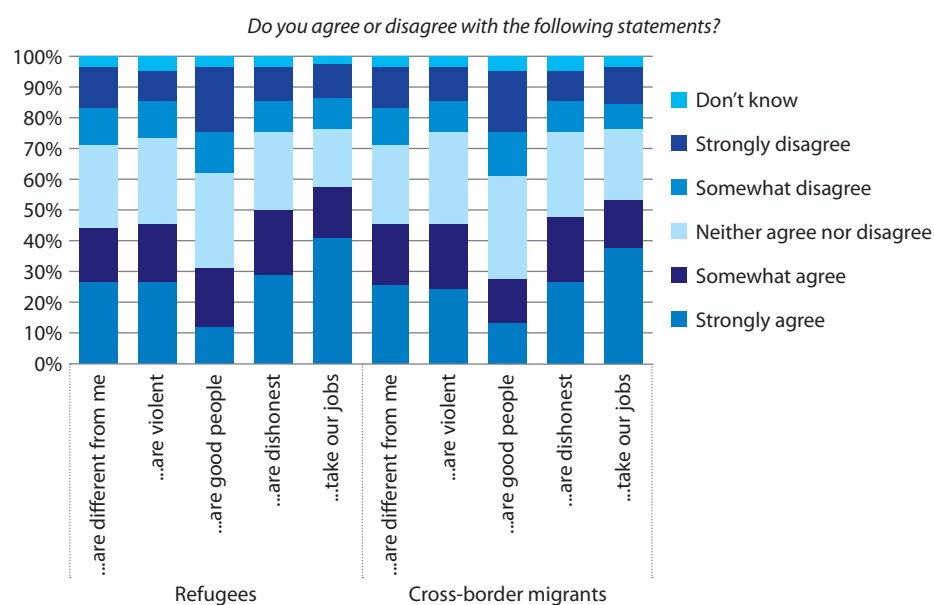

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Figure 1: Public attitudes towards the characteristics of refugees and cross-border migrants (Source: Ipsos South Africa 2019)

Welfare chauvinism

One of the principal questions surrounding refugees in South Africa concerns whether this group should receive the same access to social welfare as native-born citizens. During the COVID-19 pandemic, who should benefit from the welfare system (especially the Social Relief of Distress Grant) has been the subject of a controversial and contentious debate. The desire to deny (or restrict) welfare access for the foreign-born is known as 'welfare chauvinism'. The term has been employed in Europe to explain the emergence of right-wing nationalist parties in the context of growing ethnic diversity (Mudde 2002). In their most extreme form, welfare chauvinists argue for excluding the foreign-born from any welfare provision whatsoever. In weaker forms, people who hold this view contend that benefits for immigrants should be conditional on, for instance, financial contribution made to the country (for further discussion, see Reeskens & Van Oorschot 2012).

To examine support for welfare chauvinism amongst the general LKWG population, let us look at attitudes towards the conditions under which refugees should receive social grants and services. Here fieldworkers asked respondents *when* they thought refugees should obtain these rights. Response categories included: (i) immediately on arrival; (ii) after living in South Africa for a year, whether or not they have worked; (iii) only after they have worked and paid taxes for at least a year; (iv) once they have become a South African citizen; and (v) they should never get the same rights. About two-fifths of the population supported the most exclusionary option, while 15% backed rights based upon citizenship. Nearly a fifth (17%) of the populace said it should be conditional and based upon reciprocity, and only 14% took an unconditional stance on this issue. Reviewing these results, it is surprising

that birthplace emerged as the main driving mechanism for granting welfare. Given the country's history of struggle against racism, this is a far more ethno-nationalistic response than was anticipated.

Volunteering to help refugees

In order to address anti-refugee sentiments in South Africa, it is necessary to better comprehend prosocial behaviour amongst the populace. Let us start by looking at who is volunteering to help refugees in the LKWG public. Figure 2 depicts levels of individual engagement in different kinds of help for refugees living in the country in the twelve months prior to the interview. Here help can be defined in a variety of different ways, including both intangible and tangible forms. The most common form of help given was a material donation (7%) followed by information sharing with friends and family (6%). Holding a welfare chauvinistic position decreased the odds of helping refugees. This result shows the importance of anti-refugee attitudes as determinants of volunteering.

Reviewing the data, it was surprising to observe that a significant number of people thought that organisations helping refugees were engaged in

deceitful profiteering. Most of the LKWG population (53%) believed that these organisations were misappropriating money meant for refugees. Such views were common even amongst those who had helped in the last twelve months. In addition, belief in the dishonesty of aid agencies was found to be particularly strong amongst those with a friend who volunteered to help refugees. Of those with such a friend, 64% claimed that aid agencies were dishonest, compared to 51% of those without a volunteer friend.

Spiritual beliefs are the cornerstone of how many people in South Africa see the world, informing how important principals (such as compassion and charity) are practised. Despite this centrality, the LKWG populace was divided on whether their faith establishes an obligation to provide for the needs of those entering the country. Two-fifths of the public agreed with the statement, while 23% did not and 37% were unsure (see Figure 3). The religious subgroup that was the most likely to agree with the statement were mainline Protestants (52%), while Zionist Christians (38%) were the least likely to agree. More than half (51%) of those who provided some form of support to refugees in the last twelve months told fieldworkers that their faith includes
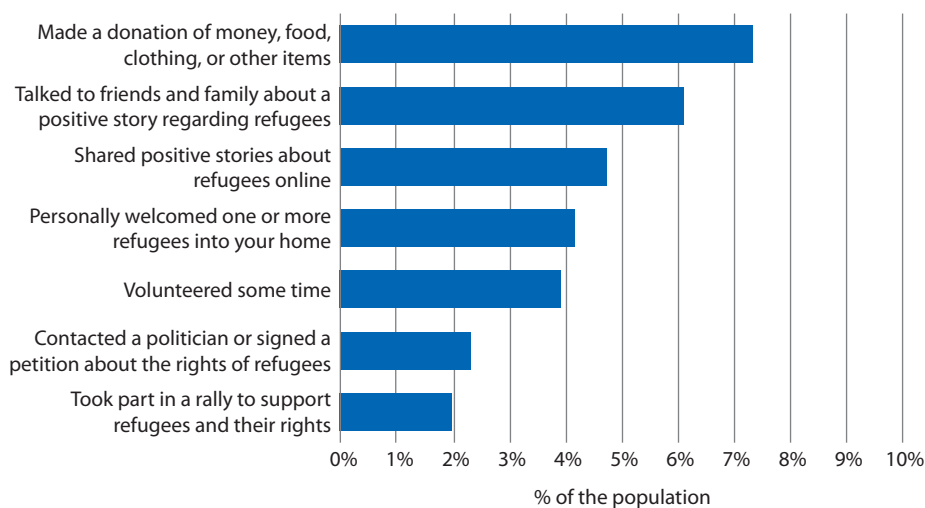

Figure 2: Public volunteering to support and assist refugees in the last twelve months (multiple response) (Source: Ipsos South Africa 2019)

Do you agree or disagree that according to my faith, we should help provide for the needs of those entering South Africa as migrant?
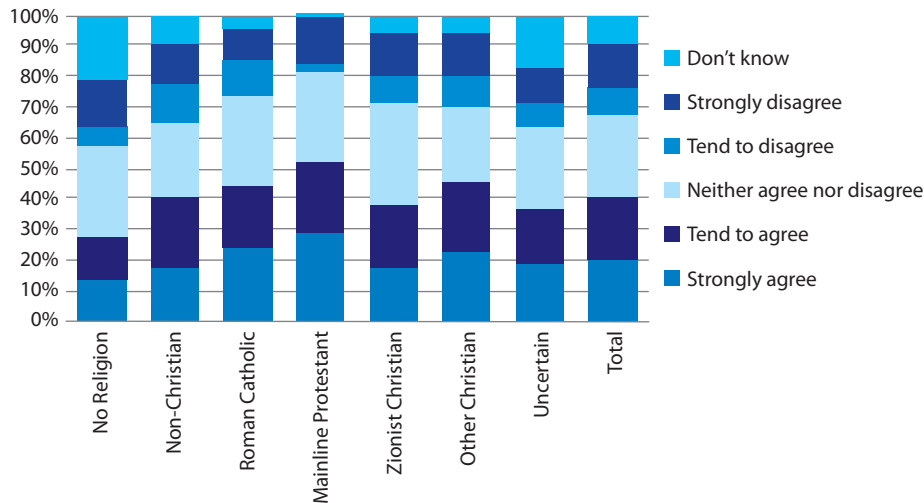

Figure 3: How faith affects attitudes to assisting migrants and refugees, by religious affiliation (Source: Ipsos South Africa 2019)

a duty to help. This demonstrates the important role played by religious communities in building support for the refugee community.

Attitudinal segmentation
We need effective targeted campaigns to expand public goodwill towards refugees. This will require identifying and effectively mapping networks of attitudes and preferences on this issue. Using 15 questions on refugees, an attitudinal segmentation of the LKWG public was conducted. Four distinct opinion clusters were identified: (i) Liberal; (ii) Ambivalent; (iii) Careful; and (iv) Judgmental. The Liberal cluster represents a fifth of the LKWG population and is defined as those who are most positive about refugees and most willing to help them. The Judgmental cluster comprises 26% of the populace and is the least prepared to provide this group with any assistance.

Between the extremes of the Liberal and Judgmental clusters were a middle group that was open to adopting more conciliatory views on refugees. The Ambivalent cluster are the largest segment (accounting for 31% of the

LKWG public) and is largely disengaged from this issue. The Careful cluster contains 23% of the population and is comprised of those who are worried about the impact of refugees on societal wellbeing. However, the Careful cluster accepts the need for refugees to seek sanctuary. Given the extreme negativity shown by the Judgmental cluster, it may be better for communication specialists to target these middle groups. Utilising this segmentation, it is possible to identify demographic, geographic and socio-economic differences between the four clusters, as indicated in Table 1.

Recommendations
There is a need to encourage the general public to embrace a **more progressive view** of refugees and cross-border migrants. In order to achieve this, communication specialists must target false stereotypes about the dishonest and violent nature of refugees. This is not as impossible as it sounds. The data presented shows that a significant number of people can be classified as Liberals, willing to support pro-refugee policies and initiatives. The goal should be to expand this number by targeting those who are open to persuasion. The brief has mapped the demographic and

socio-economic characteristics of the different attitudinal clusters to make this possible. For example, people belonging to the Ambivalent Cluster tend to be younger, female, Black African and living outside major metropolitan areas. Targeted with specific messaging, it would be possible to move this cluster towards a more supportive position on refugees.

The successful **implementation of communication strategies will require recruiting allies** within important segments of South African society. Religious institutions and leaders could play a powerful role in any pro-refugee communication campaign. Christian leaders of various kinds might exert a particularly persuasive influence on dispelling anti-immigrant sentiments in their congregations. Currently, many of those in the four provinces surveyed said that faith does not influence their views of refugees. This result presents communication specialists with an opportunity. Encouraging religious leaders to take a stand on this important issue could have a substantial effect on pro-refugee attitudes and behaviour. It will be important, in particular, to engage with the Zionist Christian movement, where sentiment about refugees is least positive

Under current conditions, **funding** for the refugee population in South Africa has become increasingly scarce, with few of their long-term needs being satisfied. Civil society has a critical role in providing humanitarian aid to this vulnerable group. We need to encourage those who can materially assist refugee populations through donations (and other types of assistance) to do so. However, many people seem to think that those helping refugees were opportunistic, and that money collected for refugees is stolen. Ensuring transparency and improving the reputation of pro-refugee organisations is, therefore, essential to encouraging

Table 1: Socio-demographic and geographic characteristics of the four clusters (column percentages) (Source: Ipsos South Africa 2019)

		Liberal		Careful		Judgmental		Ambivalent	
Gender	Male	20	(1.63)	23	(1.63)	28	(1.79)	29	(1.73)
	Female	20	(1.55)	23	(1.66)	25	(1.71)	32	(1.80)
Age group	15–19	28	(4.77)	18	(3.66)	15	(3.96)	39	(5.0)
	20–34	22	(1.82)	22	(1.80)	25	(1.88)	32	(2.04)
	35–54	18	(1.75)	24	(1.86)	29	(1.99)	29	(1.89)
	55+	16	(2.79)	26	(3.38)	33	(3.61)	26	(3.27)
Racial group	White	30	(4.28)	23	(3.91)	27	(4.04)	20	(3.49)
	Black African	19	(1.29)	23	(1.36)	26	(1.41)	31	(1.46)
	Indian	20	(5.47)	12	(4.37)	37	(7.70)	30	(6.75)
	Coloured	19	(2.53)	24	(2.97)	23	(3.19)	34	(3.47)
Geotype	Urban (metro)	22	(1.43)	24	(1.47)	27	(1.55)	27	(1.53)
	Urban (non-metro)	22	(3.65)	18	(2.88)	23	(3.42)	36	(3.84)
	Traditional authority areas	13	(1.80)	26	(2.77)	25	(2.57)	36	(2.72)
	Farms	20	(6.84)	11	(3.47)	35	(7.13)	34	(6.53)
Province of residence	Western Cape	24	(2.28)	26	(2.23)	19	(2.18)	31	(2.31)
	KwaZulu-Natal	19	(2.22)	23	(2.25)	28	(2.51)	31	(2.49)
	Gauteng	21	(1.85)	25	(1.95)	28	(2.02)	26	(1.98)
	Limpopo	15	(2.56)	16	(2.75)	27	(2.88)	42	(3.30)
Employment status	Full-time work	23	(2.0)	24	(1.90)	23	(2.00)	30	(2.13)
	Part-time work	18	(2.85)	22	(3.33)	24	(3.23)	36	(3.52)
	Unemployment	16	(2.14)	24	(2.26)	30	(2.50)	29	(2.38)
	Outside labour market	21	(2.17)	22	(2.32)	27	(2.46)	30	(2.48)
Educational attainment	Incomplete secondary or less	16	(1.65)	23	(1.82)	30	(2.06)	32	(2.06)
	Completed secondary	22	(1.72)	22	(1.71)	23	(1.78)	33	(1.89)
	Tertiary schooling	23	(3.04)	27	(3.15)	28	(3.06)	21	(2.65)

Linearised standard errors are in parenthesis. Values above the national average are shaded in blue, and below national average are not shaded.

volunteer behaviour. This will require a coordinated approach amongst pro-refugee civil society groups and better monitoring of how non-profits use their resources.

At present one of the most progressive interventions that requires greater investment is **refugee integration**. The lack of well-resourced immigrant integration programmes has been recognised as a problem in the White Paper on International Migration (Republic of South Africa 2017). Interventions that help refugees integrate would assist this vulnerable group engage in positive contacts (i.e. friendly and cooperative) in the communities in which they live. Positive contact has been shown to reduce anti-foreigner sentiment and reduce unfounded stereotypes against this group (Gordon & Maharaj 2015). Integration programmes would involve acculturalisation that would help refugees learn local languages and customs. Such interventions also need to help refugees with labour market access and entry into local civil society (e.g. trade unions, business associations and local charities). This will allow refugees to make a greater (and more positive) contribution to their community, which will further undermine anti-immigrant stereotypes. These interventions would target the major metropolitan centres where most refugees and asylum seekers are thought to live. In order to reach the community most in need, government will need to work with relevant community associations and non-governmental organisations.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, hundreds of thousands of South Africans have been infected and thousands have died as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This disease has had a profound impact on all aspects of our nation, prompting the need to reconsider the importance a compassionate and supportive society. There is growing concern that when our nation emerges from the worst of the pandemic, it will be a more hostile, closed and inimical place for refugees. Although this can be prevented, it will require developing adequate refugee integration programmes as well as mobilising ordinary people to change

their views of this vulnerable group. Pursuing these stratagems are both reasonable and possible, despite the new challenges that the COVID-19 crisis presents.

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