



Indigenous grassroots migration labels: Resistance language to migration influx in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Though migration policy sometimes gives institutional labels (e.g., ‘refugee,’ ‘migrant’) top priority while marginalising grassroots terminology developed by local groups, South Africa is still a key destination for intra-African movement. This study analysed the socio-political consequences of young South Africans using indigenous grassroots labels as opposition to migratory inflow using the rational choice cost-benefit (RCCB) theoretical framework. The study indicates via desktop research that these labels, often negative and degrading, represent a coping strategy against perceived resource rivalry and cultural dangers. However, such colloquial names avoid international protection levels, therefore aggravating migrants’ vulnerability and restricting their access to rights. The paper’s main question is how indigenous grassroots labels can capture conflicts between institutionalised government shortcomings and informal resistance by exposing a paradox: young agency, albeit founded on justified complaints, increases exclusion when institutional structures abandon accountability. The results highlight the conflict between systematic governance shortcomings and unofficial resistance tactics, therefore supporting inclusive policies that address both young people’s complaints and migrant protection. This study makes a significant contribution to connecting migration theory with real-world governance by showing how institutional labels and grassroots opposition words make migrants in South Africa even more vulnerable. It gives practical decolonial alternatives like participatory dialogues, economic reforms, and anti-xenophobia media literacy to break down discriminatory labelling, put migrant agency at the centre, and change necropolitical institutions into systems of universal rights and solidarity.

Keywords: Indigenous grassroots migration labels, migration, rational choice cost-benefit (RCCB) theory, South Africa, young people.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa has a population of 62 million. About 4.2 million are foreign migrants, or 7% of South Africa’s population, one of the highest percentages in Africa.¹ The country’s migration scene is a furnace of historical tragedy and socioeconomic inequality. Migration has sparked repeated xenophobic

¹ Statistics South Africa, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) – Q2 2023* (Pretoria: Stats SA, 2023).4.

violence, with 612,298 migrant fatalities and 122,298 registered between 2008 and 2020.² The young people of South Africa, who see migrants as rivals for limited jobs, housing, and public services and have startling 34% rates of unemployment, are at the centre of this turbulence.³

According to Gomo, the youth in South Africa are involved in xenophobic attitudes and violence because of the competition for resources.⁴ This approach by the youth can be described as a form of grassroots resistance and protection against the influx of migrants in South Africa. This approach is a deviation from the institutionalised categorisation of migrants, which warrants access to rights and humanitarian assistance. Common categorisation labels include ‘refugee’, ‘migrant’, ‘displaced person’, ‘climate migrant’ and ‘protection seeker’; however, Pijenburg and Rijken contest that these labels are not fixed and neutral.⁵

The literature shows that categorisation has become one of the most consequential and contested dimensions of mobility governance. Migration categorisation “emanates from administrative contexts that are usually policy-driven.”⁶ They tend not to emerge from the complex reality constituted by people on the move but are shaped by and derived from laws, organizational practices, and migration politics.” However, there is a gap in understanding indigenous grassroots labels from communities. The indigenous grassroots labels have the potential to serve as tools of power and resistance, and to go beyond the means of classification. This paper explores how grassroots labels are formulated, imposed, and used as resistance to migration matters. The paper's main question is how indigenous grassroots labels capture conflicts between institutionalised government shortcomings and informal resistance. It exposes a paradox: young agency, albeit founded on justified complaints, increases exclusion when institutional structures abandon accountability.

The paper first presents a study of the literature, which criticises the restrictive hierarchies of institutional labels. This is followed by the RCCB framework, which then looks at how young people explain grassroots labels. The third section explains the methodology used in this paper. This is followed by the findings and discussion of this study. The study offers recommendations based on the discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review focuses on the function of labelling in migration governance. Reflecting the power dynamics inherent in migration governance and humanitarian responses, the politics of labelling in forced migration studies has become a central focus of study. Scholars have underlined how words like ‘refugee,’ ‘migrant,’ and ‘displaced person’ are political instruments that affect access to rights, protection, and permanent solutions rather than objective descriptions.⁷ Often used by governments, international organisations, and media, these labels have great ramifications for persons' lived experiences, legal statuses, and societal impressions. Emphasising how categorical comparisons support hierarchies of deservingness and exclusion. Although labels are essential for operationalising institutional frameworks, they also have sociopolitical ramifications that go beyond their immediate legal or descriptive uses and generate urgent considerations about who is excluded and how protection levels are set.⁸ This dichotomy emphasises in migration governance the conflict between ethical obligation and bureaucratic efficiency.

Legal hierarchies and the refugee label

The legal and political weight of the term ‘refugee,’ as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention, forms the central focus for this argument. According to Zetter, the refugee tag is a tool of exclusion as much

² J.P. Misago, L.B. Landau, and T. Monson, *Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: Trends, Patterns, and Responses* (Johannesburg: African Centre for Migration & Society, 2021). 20.

³ Statistics South Africa, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) – Q2 2023*.viii,

⁴ T. Gomo, *Analysis of Media Reporting and Xenophobia Violence among Youth in South Africa* (Malmö: Malmö University, 2010).vii.

⁵ A. Pijenburg and C. Rijken . “Moving beyond refugees and migrants: reconceptualising the rights of people on the move”. *Interventions*, 23(2), (2021)273–293.

⁶ L. Hadj Abdou, and F. Zardo, “Migration categories and the politics of labeling.” In G. Sciortino, M. Cvajner, & P. J. Kivisto (Eds.), *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Migration* (pp. 34–45). (2024), Edward Elgar Publishing.

⁷ L. Hadj Abdou, and F. Zardo, “Migration categories and the politics of labeling

⁸ Cole, “Statelessness, Membership, and the Right to Have Rights”.

as a protective one.⁹ Although it provides access to particular rights under international law, its restrictive definition, that of those escaping persecution based on race, religion, nationality, or political opinion, excludes people displaced by environmental disasters, economic collapse, or generalised violence, even while it allows access to special rights under international law. This exclusion results in hierarchies among displaced people, whereby some are classified as ‘genuine’ refugees deserving of protection and others as ‘economic migrants’ refused asylum. Long broadens this criticism by showing how governments deliberately use labels to avoid their humanitarian responsibilities.¹⁰ To support limited border restrictions, detention, or deportation, countries might designate newcomers as ‘migrants,’ instead of ‘refugees,’ therefore undercutting international protection systems. Cole argues further that the institutional dependence on such labels sustains a crisis of categorisation, in which legal systems give administrative convenience priority above the complexity of human movement, therefore placing millions in legal uncertainty.¹¹

The binary refugee-migrant public discourse

In public and governmental spheres, the differences between ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ have been especially divisive. As Zetter and Crawley & Skleparis contend, the refugee-migrant dichotomy is a political instrument.¹² While the refugee designation provides legal protection, its limited definition leaves out individuals escaping non-persecutory dangers; the word ‘migrant’ denigrates asylum requests by characterising migration as voluntary. Accordingly, the binary hides diverse migratory reasons, including overlapping environmental and economic crises. Such branding affects public views as well as policies, therefore encouraging xenophobia and weakening sympathy with displaced people. For instance, media stories during the 2015 European ‘migration crisis’ regularly confused refugees with irregular migrants, hence fuelling concerns of ‘invasion and supporting border militarisation.’¹³ These discursive techniques support what Zetter describes as the ‘labelling paradox,’ whereby classification both promotes and limits protection at once.¹⁴ The indigenous grassroots labels of South Africa, which weaponise language variations to portray immigrants as outsiders, powerfully show this dichotomy. Cole notes that this duality reinforces a hierarchy of humanity, whereby the moral value of displaced people is assessed by reductive labels instead of their real needs or vulnerabilities.¹⁵

As witnessed in the post-apartheid scene of South Africa, this exclusive dichotomy shows itself in indigenous grassroots labels, which weaponise language distinctions to characterise immigrants as everlasting outsiders. From derision to violence, the term’s development reflects Zetter’s ‘labelling paradox,’ in which categorisation both facilitates and limits protection at once.¹⁶

Displacement labels and the politics of responsibility

Likewise, the phrase ‘displaced person’ captures even another degree of uncertainty. Although it may include a wider spectrum of events, including internal displacement, it usually lacks the legal clarity of ‘refugee,’ leaving people in extended uncertainty devoid of permanent answers. Long points out that terms like ‘internally displaced person’ (IDP) are rarely supported by legal rights, as IDPs remain under state control and are sometimes disregarded by international players.¹⁷ This shows how labels could hide structural obligations, therefore distorting focus from state responsibility towards depoliticised humanitarian actions. Though increasingly used in advocacy circles, the title ‘climate refugee’ is not recognised in international law,¹⁸ therefore further marginalising persons displaced by environmental

⁹ Zetter, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization.”181.

¹⁰ Long, “When Refugees Stopped Being Migrants: Movement, Labour and Humanitarian Protection.”4.

¹¹ Cole, “Statelessness, Membership, and the Right to Have Rights”.

¹² Zetter, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization, 173”; Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis, 49.”

¹³ Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis.”49.

¹⁴ Zetter, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization.”174.

¹⁵ Cole, “Statelessness, Membership, and the Right to Have Rights”.

¹⁶ Zetter, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization.” 175.

¹⁷ Long, “When Refugees Stopped Being Migrants: Movement, Labour and Humanitarian Protection.”

¹⁸ IPCC, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).1140.

causes.¹⁹ These illustrations show how labels serve as tools of responsibility-shifting, allowing governments and organisations to either specifically highlight or overlook displacement crises depending on geopolitical concerns.²⁰

Exclusion, protection thresholds and vulnerability

The junction of vulnerability and branding raises important issues regarding who is excluded and how protection limits are set. Although institutional frameworks can rely on labels as surrogates for vulnerability, this strategy runs the danger of ignoring overlapping kinds of marginalisation. For example, homogenising words like ‘refugee’ or ‘migrant’ often renders women, children, and LGBTQ+ persons invisible, even if they may be at exacerbated danger in relocation.²¹ Vulnerability evaluations in asylum proceedings, according to Crawley and Skleparis, are typically limited and Eurocentric, giving apparent trauma top priority above structural disparities such as poverty or gender-based violence.²² This leads to exclusionary effects whereby only individuals who fulfil preconceptions of ‘worth’ get protection. Cole similarly questions the vulnerability paradox, in which labels used to highlight the most at-risk groups unintentionally build hierarchies excluding others.²³ For instance, even if they suffer life-threatening hardship, the emphasis on ‘refugees’ in resettlement programs obscures those dubbed ‘economic migrants.’

Bureaucratic labelling and imbalance of power

Labelling affects access to resources and integration possibilities, thereby influencing not just legal statuses but also Programs for resettlement of refugees; for example, giving formal recognition to refugees while leaving others depending on unstable unofficial networks. With ‘refugees’ sometimes considered as transitory guests awaiting repatriation and ‘migrants’ seen as permanent challenges to national identity, Crawley and Skleparis further contend that labels shape the temporality of displacement.²⁴ Such stories impede local integration and support cycles of marginalisation. Furthermore, bureaucratic labelling systems, such as refugee status determination, are rife with power asymmetries since gatekeepers (e.g., immigration officials, UNHCR officials) subjectively interpret identities and narratives, frequently via racialised or gendered lenses.²⁵ Freedman emphasises how gender prejudices in these procedures cause women’s asylum claims, especially those pertaining to domestic abuse or sexual persecution, to be often judged ‘private’ rather than political concerns to be discounted.²⁶

Inclusive frameworks and solidarity tales

Critics want a review of labelling policies to correct these injustices. While Crawley and Skleparis demand solidarity-oriented narratives that span category differences,²⁷ Zetter supports more inclusive frameworks that acknowledge the variety of displacement sources.²⁸ Cole suggests a contextual vulnerability strategy whereby protection systems react to people’s actual reality instead of strict classifications.²⁹ Still, there are difficulties when nations object to diminishing the exclusivity of the refugee identity because of increased responsibilities. Scholars and grassroots organisations underline the importance of ‘non-categorical solidarity,’ which places human rights above legal categories.³⁰ In

¹⁹ Zetter, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization.”181.

²⁰ Cole, “Statelessness, Membership, and the Right to Have Rights”.

²¹ Jane Freedman, *Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate* (springer, 2015).86.

²² Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis.’”50.

²³ Cole, “Statelessness, Membership, and the Right to Have Rights”.

²⁴ Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis.’”52.

²⁵ Long, “When Refugees Stopped Being Migrants: Movement, Labour and Humanitarian Protection.”20.

²⁶ Freedman, *Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate*.94.

²⁷ Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis.’”49.

²⁸ Zetter, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization.”182.

²⁹ Cole, “Statelessness, Membership, and the Right to Have Rights”.

³⁰ Freedman, *Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate*.

the end, the politics of branding exposes the conflict between protection and control in migrant governance, therefore stressing the need for critical research to question exclusionary ideologies and raise displaced voices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rational Choice Cost-Benefit (RCCB) Theory

Rooted in classical rational choice theory, the rational choice cost-benefit (RCCB) theory holds that people and groups make decisions by assessing the possible costs and benefits of their actions, so prioritising options that maximise apparent gains while minimising losses.³¹ Rising from the fields of economics and sociology, rational choice theory holds that, motivated by self-interest within structural limitations, human activity is goal-oriented and instrumental. Emphasising the calculative character of decision-making, especially in situations when institutional mechanisms neglect to solve collective concerns, the RCCB framework expands this idea. Applied extensively to migration studies, this theory has helped to explain events like migration decision-making, opposition to displacement, and the development of unofficial government systems.³² In the South African setting, RCCB offers a critical prism through which to examine how young people justify their responsibility as custodians of local resources and cultural identity, therefore avoiding institutional designations meant to control migration. RCCB theory originated in the writings of Gary Becker, who maintained that cost-benefit analyses help one to understand human behavior, even in non-financial spheres.³³ James Coleman built on this paradigm by including social structures and power dynamics into rational choice models, therefore arguing that people negotiate difficult social systems by balancing the risks and benefits of group activity.³⁴

RCCB has been quite helpful in migration studies in clarifying why displaced people adopt travel paths, oppose repatriation, or work informally.³⁵ These projects show how underprivileged groups create different ways to protect their interests when faced with systematic inefficiencies. Likewise, young South Africans who deal with unemployment rates above 34% and limited public services conduct cost-benefit studies to negotiate migration-driven fears.³⁶ This is consistent with RCCB theory: young people rationalise businesses as a low-cost means of conserving limited economic possibilities. Reflecting Coleman's belief that group action minimises individual risks,³⁷ the apparent advantage of lowering employment rivalry exceeds the moral cost of exclusion. Their rejection of institutional designations such 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker' results from a logical evaluation that formal systems fall short in reducing supposed hazards to their socioeconomic stability.

RCCB theory clarifies the processes by which young people gain responsibility for gatekeeping outside of institutional protection. The seeming inefficacy of state-led migration policy drives the centrality of this process. Young people logically choose informal approaches with quick, clear rewards when institutional designations and policies seem to be either insensitive or exclusive. For example, young people are driven to create grassroots systems to control migrant inclusion due to the lack of strong legal frameworks to handle resource competition or cultural integration. Though exclusive, these systems are justified as required to protect shared resources and societal cohesiveness. According to the hypothesis, young people choose autonomous gatekeeping tactics as the expenses of depending on institutional systems, such as bureaucratic delays, corruption, or alleged favouritism towards migrants, weigh more than the advantages. This is consistent with Castles' observation that policies on migration sometimes fail if they ignore the actual reality of local communities, therefore encouraging grassroots opposition.³⁸

³¹ G.S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 5; J.S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

³² Douglas S. Massey et al., "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal," *Population and Development Review* 19, no. 3 (September 1993): 431, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2938462>; Stephen Castles, "Why Migration Policies Fail," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27, no. 2 (March 2004): 205–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987042000177306>.

³³ Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*.

³⁴ Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*.14.

³⁵ Castles, "Why Migration Policies Fail."858.

³⁶ Statistics South Africa, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) – Q2 2023*.12.

³⁷ Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*.38.

³⁸ Castles, "Why Migration Policies Fail."855.

Moreover, RCCB shows how communal action dynamics support young gatekeeping. Rational agents understand that group actions lower individual risks and increase overall benefits.³⁹ Youth cooperation against migratory inflow reduces the personal costs of resistance in South Africa, where historical conflicts over resource allocation and identity politics endure. Young individuals minimise the cognitive discomfort connected with exclusive conduct by characterising migration as a zero-sum struggle, therefore justifying their activity as a logical reaction to systematic neglect. This communal logic keeps the loop of informal gatekeeping under normalcy, hence weakening confidence in institutional safeguards. The idea also explains how political leaders help to shape young opinions. Youth logically match their activities with dominant narratives to avoid social ostracism or political marginalisation when politicians demonise immigrants for socioeconomic issues.⁴⁰ RCCB therefore shows how macro-level structural failures and micro-level logical computations interact to maintain informal gatekeeping.

RCCB emphasises, most importantly, the contradiction of this kind of resistance: whereas grassroots approaches provide temporary respite, they aggravate long-term vulnerability. Though justified as a preventive step, young gatekeeping fosters social fragmentation and discourages investment in underprivileged areas. To destroy the cost-benefit justification underlying exclusion, the theory emphasises the importance of tackling the underlying reasons for young disenchantment, like unemployment and service delivery shortcomings. RCCB invites legislators to create inclusive frameworks that balance local complaints with migrant rights by stressing the agency of young people within systemic limitations. By doing this, it provides a road to turn opposition into reconciliation, hence bridging the distance between individual reason and group benefit.

METHODOLOGY

With an eye on data collection, analytical frameworks, and methodological constraints, this study used a qualitative desktop research methodology to investigate the interaction between institutional migration labels and indigenous grassroots labels in South Africa. Data was gathered from four secondary sources: (1) peer-reviewed academic articles sourced via JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar using keywords such as ‘migration labels,’ ‘xenophobia,’ and ‘grassroots resistance’; (2) reports from NGOs like the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) and Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), which provided empirical insights into migrant vulnerabilities; (3) media articles from South African outlets (Mail & Guardian, Daily Maverick) and international platforms, analysed to track public narratives and the mediatisation; and (4) government documents, including policy statements and parliamentary records, to assess institutional complicity.

To make sure these sources were good and useful, specific criteria were used to choose them. For peer-reviewed articles, priority was given to works by important authors in the field of migration studies and articles published in high-impact journals. The researchers chose NGO reports based on the organization's reputation for being an expert in South Africa and having a presence there. They preferred reports that clearly explained their research methods. They picked media outlets based on their reputation for honest reporting and their ability to reach people all over South Africa. Official public records and parliamentary archives were used to make sure that government documents were real.

Methodological triangulation made sure that the analysis was reliable by checking the results from one type of source (like academic theories) against those from other types (like NGO empirical data or media reports of events). In addition, a systematic thematic analysis was performed. This process began with a preliminary review to pinpoint emergent, inductive themes, which were subsequently subjected to thorough examination and organisation through the RCCB theoretical framework, resulting in the coherent analytical categories outlined in the findings.

The period (2008–2023) was chosen to reflect changes in post-apartheid migration policies as well as recurrent xenophobic violence. Selected for their clear connection to grassroots labelling and systematic exclusion were three case studies: the 2008 xenophobic riots, the 2015 Durban assaults, and

³⁹ Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*. 38.

⁴⁰ Statistics South Africa, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) – Q2 2023*.

the 2019 Johannesburg looting. These incidents highlight how young people weaponised the indigenous grassroots label, giving contextual complexity to the sociopolitical triggers of violence.

First, inductive themes such as ‘dehumanisation’, ‘resource competition,’ and ‘state complicity’ were refined into more general analytical categories, including ‘necropolitical exclusion’⁴¹ and ‘rationalised gatekeeping’ guided by the Rational Choice Cost-Benefit (RCCB) framework.⁴² Using the RCCB lens, for example, young acceptance of exclusionary labels was examined in relation to how unemployment (34%)⁴³ and perceived resource shortage motivated antagonism. Using Nyamnjoh’s theories of dehumanisation, critical discourse analysis further broke down how media and governmental narratives enhanced stigmatising phrases.⁴⁴

Among the difficulties were the dependence on past data, which in under-documented rural areas especially ran the danger of inheriting reporting biases. Though NGO testimonies (e.g., MSF’s PTSD survey) and migrant stories from media archives somewhat filled in for the absence of original interviews, limiting direct contact with migrant or youth perspectives.⁴⁵ Ethical issues included anonymising private information from reporting and carefully contextualising media sources to prevent repeating stigmatising language. The dependence of this study on secondary data runs the danger of inheriting urban-centric reporting biases, especially the under-representation of rural viewpoints, and may limit its success. Furthermore, lacking primary interviews inhibits a complex understanding of migrant and young agency. Although NGO testimonies help to somewhat close this disparity, future studies should give participatory approaches top priority to challenge Eurocentric vulnerability paradigms.⁴⁶

While combining RCCB with critical discourse analysis illuminated how macro-level structural failures (e.g., border corruption) and micro-level agency (youth rationalisation) intersect, the theoretical integration of the methodology gave African scholarship top priority to challenge Eurocentric labels. Emphasising rigour in source triangulation and theoretical coherence, this method, limited by desktop constraints, provided a reproducible methodology for understanding labelling politics in disputed migratory settings.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings are presented in two broad themes: the social constructions of indigenous grassroots labels; and the institutional complicity fuelling the fire for labelling.

The Indigenous grassroots labels and migration

Indigenous grassroots names like *Makwerekwere* (babbler who speak unintelligibly), *Maguma-guma* (those who cheat), and *Omalayitsha* (Smuggler) that have emerged in South Africa show a poisonous interaction of institutional failure, economic desperation, and historical trauma. Designed by young people as a means of resistance and control, these labels start in particular sociopolitical settings but develop into instruments of dehumanisation, hence aggravating migrants’ vulnerabilities. Calculated by horrifying numbers, their effects expose a cycle of violence, marginalisation, and systematic neglect, calling for immediate attention.

Makwerekwere: mocking the ‘Other’

As South Africa rebuilt itself on the African continent despite growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the post-apartheid era, the word *makwerekere* emerged. Derived from an onomatopoeic parody of languages spoken by immigrants, especially those from Francophone or Lusophone areas, the name reflects the supposed ‘babble’ of foreign tongues. It frames migrants as outsiders unable to integrate, therefore lowering them to a subhuman level. The name became popular in the 1990s as the neoliberal policies of

⁴¹ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no.1 (January 1, 2003):27, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

⁴² Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*, 38; Castles, “Why Migration Policies Fail.,858”

⁴³ Statistics South Africa, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) – Q2 2023*. 12.

⁴⁴ Francis B Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa* (Zed Books, 2006).42.

⁴⁵ Médecins Sans Frontières, *Mental Health and Trauma among Migrants in Durban* (Johannesburg: MSF South Africa, 2020).80.

⁴⁶ Crawley and Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis.’”63.

the government expanded inequality, and rivalry for homes and employment grew. By the mid-2000s, *Makwerekwere* had evolved into a rallying cry for xenophobic violence, embodied in the 2008 riots when groups yelled *phansi aMakwerekwere* ('down with the foreigners') while confronting immigrants.

Xenophobic attacks connected to indigenous grassroots labelling have taken hundreds of lives. With Mozambican national Ernesto Nhamuave burnt alive in a horrifying portrayal of Makwerekwere dehumanisation, the 2008 riots alone claimed 62 dead and displaced 100,000 migrants. The African Centre for Migration & Society reports that xenophobic violence claimed 612, 298 lives and displaced 122,298 migrants between 2008 and 2020.⁴⁷

Medical xenophobia, justified by names like *Makwerekwere*, denies migrants access to life-saving treatment, therefore acting as a kind of healthcare exclusion. Despite rules ensuring universal access, 2019 research by Crush and Chikanda recorded incidents when Zimbabwean migrants were denied HIV treatment in Limpopo clinics unless they generated refugee documents.⁴⁸ Often after being branded as 'outsiders,' 33% of Cape Town migrants claimed being turned away from vaccination stations during the COVID-19 epidemic.⁴⁹ This exclusion aggravates public health crises: whereas migrants make up just 7% of South Africa's population, untreated infections cause 15% of TB cases.⁵⁰

Severe mental health tolls are caused by the ongoing threat of violence and exclusion. According to a Médecins Sans Frontières poll, 68% of Durban migrants showed signs of PTSD; many of them reported dreams started by hearing the word *Makwerekwere*. About 33% of migrants in Durban were denied COVID-19 immunisations.⁵¹ Children are especially susceptible; migrant students experience bullying in schools as '*Makwerekwere* kids,' which results in three times higher dropout rates than South African classmates.

Maguma-guma: Border Chaos and Corruption

By blaming migrants for border instability rather than corrupt officials, young people rationalise exclusion as a cost-effective reaction to systematic failures, mirroring De Genova's idea of deportability, wherein state actions render migrants perennially 'illegal.'⁵² *Maguma-guma* started in border communities like Musina with young resentment at systematic corruption. Often paying bribes to border authorities, who cooperate with smuggling networks, migrants cross from Zimbabwe or Mozambique. However, young people turned their wrath against immigrants, redefining them as 'cheats' abusing open borders, instead of criticising state players. The name became well-known following 2010 when media stories revealed extensive corruption at the Beitbridge border station. Government narratives stressing 'border insecurity,' however, blamed migrants, allowing young people to understand *Maguma-guma* as a moral condemnation of outsiders rather than a critique of institutional decay.

From the economic exploitation standpoint, the unofficial economy, where 65% of migrants work, becomes a target for predation: police extract 'fines' from street merchants branded *Maguma-guma*, while landlords charge migrants treble the rent for improvised accommodation.

Omalayitsha: Scapegoating for Money

Originally referring to cross-border transporters, the term *Omalayitsha* was adopted by township youth to accuse migrant entrepreneurs of "smuggling" possibilities away from residents. This change corresponded with the economic standstill of South Africa following 2008, as youth unemployment surged to 34%.⁵³ Particularly in the informal sectors, politicians and media outlets magnified stories of migrants "stealing" employment. By 2019, the label had evolved into a rationale for burning foreign-

⁴⁷ Misago, Landau, and Monson, *Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: Trends, Patterns, and Responses*. 16.

⁴⁸ J. Crush and A. Chikanda, (2015). "South-South medical tourism and the quest for health in Southern Africa." *Social Science & Medicine*, 124, 313–320. DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.06.025.

⁴⁹ K. Vanyoro, . "'When they come, we don't send them back': counter-narratives of 'medical xenophobia' in South Africa's public health care system." Palgrave Communications, 2019, 5, Article 101.DOI: 10.1057/s41599-019-0309-7

⁵⁰ World Health Organization, and World Innovation Summit for Health. Innovative Solutions for the Elimination of Tuberculosis among Migrants and Refugees. World Health Organization, 2024,

⁵¹ Médecins Sans Frontières, *Mental Health and Trauma among Migrants in Durban*.7.

⁵² Nicholas P. De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (October 2002): 419–47, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085432>.

⁵³ Statistics South Africa, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) – Q2 2023*.95.

owned stores, with young people in Johannesburg using *Omalayitsha* must fall, an intentional echo of anti-colonial cries, to frame arson as economic justice.

With Nigerian-owned companies being targeted under the *Omalayitsha* label and 12 deaths and 700 arrests in the 2019 Johannesburg riots, this can be connected to grassroots indigenous tagging of migrants. Furthermore, labels like ‘job thieves’ and *Omalayitsha* help to justify the mistreatment of illegal immigrants. Employers pay Zimbabweans in the agricultural industry at low rates, blaming their illegal status.⁵⁴ Compared to 27% of South Africans, 44% of foreign nationals in Johannesburg earn less than the minimum pay.⁵⁵

Institutional Complicity: Fanning the Flame

Civil society and the state are active accomplices of this catastrophe, not only bystanders.

Government Scapegoating

Political leaders use exclusive designations to escape from bad government. Though barely 4% of health care consumers, former Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi's 2018 remark that migrants ‘overburden’ hospitals confirmed the *Makwerekwere* stereotype. Likewise, Johannesburg's 2022 legislation aimed at ‘foreign-owned spaza shops’ reflected young desire to ‘end *Omalayitsha* exploitation,’ thereby transforming prejudice into policy. The cooperation of law enforcement is striking: police in Musina acknowledged extorting money from *Maguma-guma*, while displaced migrants seeking safety were scattered by police during the 2021 Durban assaults.

The fractured response of civil society

Often lacking the reach or subtlety needed to challenge grassroots designations, NGOs are limited. Focused on metropolitan regions, the anti-xenophobic activities of the South African Human Rights Commission neglect rural communities where labels like *Maguma-guma* flourish. On the other hand, well-meaning projects may backfire: a 2020 job expo in Diepsloot meant to empower migrant entrepreneurs set off riots when local young people felt excluded. Even advocacy groups unintentionally help to legitimise labels; a PASSOP study utilising *Omalayitsha* supported its stigmatising power.

Grassroots labels are weapons, created in the furnace of systematic negligence and fired with terrible accuracy, not just words. Their beginnings are in young desperation to recover agency, but their effects, which count in deaths, relocation, and dehumanization, show a society breaking under the weight of its paradoxes. South Africa has to face the underlying causes, youth unemployment, border corruption, and healthcare inequity, if it is to destroy these labels. While the government has to give up using scapegoating as a political tactic, civil society must heal divisions by supporting migrants and citizens alike. The figures represent a call to action, a demand to replace exclusion with empathy before more lives are lost to the logic of *Makwerekwere*; they are not only numbers.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study expose systematic failures in migrant protection and the aggravation of vulnerabilities through localised exclusion, therefore revealing a crucial conflict between institutionalised migration labels and indigenous grassroots terms in South Africa. African academics like Landau and Nyamnjoh highlight how institutional labels like ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’ are ingrained in colonial legacies and neoliberal government, thereby establishing hierarchies of deservingness that exclude migrants displaced by economic downturn or climate change.⁵⁶ As Zetter contends, these labels give bureaucratic efficiency priority above ethical responsibility, therefore depriving millions of legal protection mechanisms of their due.⁵⁷ For example, Crush and Chikanda show how, despite constitutional safeguards, medical xenophobia stemming from institutional neglect

⁵⁴ A. Desai, “The Poors of South Africa: A Post-Apartheid Reality,” *Labour, Capital and Society* 43, no. 1 (2010): 30–54.

⁵⁵ Gauteng City-Region Observatory, “Migrant Labor and Wage Disparities in Johannesburg,” *GCRO Report No. 7.* (Johannesburg: Gauteng City-Region Observatory, 2015).13.

⁵⁶ Loren Landau, *Contemporary Migration to South Africa: A Regional Development Issue* (World Bank Publications, 2011), 12; Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa*, 25.

⁵⁷ Zetter, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization.”174.

prevents migrants' access to healthcare.⁵⁸ Rigid legal categories ignore more general institutional failure to identify overlapping vulnerabilities, including poverty or gender-based violence, which is reflected in this exclusion.⁵⁹ Consequently, migrants escaping multifaceted crises are made 'illegible' to protection systems, which drives them into unofficial survival mechanisms, increasing precarity.

Beyond South Africa, institutional designations mirror worldwide trends of exclusionary migration governance, therefore posing restrictions. The 2011 idea of humanitarian reason by Didier Fassin questions how governments and organisations give 'deserving' lives top priority while marginalising others seen as less worthy. Mirroring the 1951 Refugee Convention, the limited legal definition of the refugee label in South Africa excludes those fleeing economic crisis or climate disasters, so replicating what Fassin terms a 'hierarchy of humanity.' Liisa Malkki similarly questions the depoliticisation of displacement by institutional labels, arguing that the refugee category reduces complex lived experiences to apolitical, homogenised identities.⁶⁰ South Africa's asylum system clearly shows this erasure of context: refugees from Zimbabwe or Mozambique are routinely written off as 'economic migrants' even though they are escaping state brutality and drought.⁶¹ Malkki's view of refugees as 'speechless emissaries' speaks to this: institutional designations muffle migrants' stories, therefore favouring bureaucratic categorisation above human agency.

Redefining limits for belonging and protection, indigenous grassroots labels like *Makwerekwere* and *Maguma-guma* highlight these vulnerabilities. Nyamnjoh's study of dehumanisation clarifies how such words frame migrants as dangers to socioeconomic stability, therefore depriving them of humanity.⁶² The results of the research show that 68% of Durban migrants have PTSD connected to these labels; meanwhile, children named '*kwerekwere* kid' face quadruple the dropout rates of their classmates.⁶³ Though derived from young grievances about corruption and unemployment, these labels reinterpret vulnerability as a moral fault rather than a structural problem. As shown in the 2019 Johannesburg riots, when *omalyitsha*-labelled businesspeople were savagely assaulted, migrants are accused of 'cheating' borders or 'stealing' employment. As Landau points out, this moralising debate raises the threshold for protection by confining vulnerability with blame, hence shifting responsibility from state failures to migrants themselves.⁶⁴ Migrants must negotiate not just legal obstacles but also public vilification, a dual load that institutional systems neglect to handle to 'deserve' protection.

The work of Nicholas De Genova on migrant 'illegality' further grounds this dynamic.⁶⁵ According to him, nations create illegality by means of artificial legal classifications, therefore rendering migrants always deportable. Indigenous names like *Maguma-guma* in South Africa help to accentuate this precarity by portraying migrants as naturally criminal, even if governmental corruption allows border anarchy. De Genova's approach emphasises how institutional and grassroots labels work together to create what he defines as 'deportability,' a condition of ongoing insecurity that locks migrants into cycles of exploitation. For instance, R30 daily paid by Zimbabwean farmworkers reflects this paradox: their labour is vital, yet their 'illegal' status, combined with terms like *Omalayitsha* justifies their hyper-exploitation.

Mechanisms of institutional gatekeeping deepen marginalisation via collusion and negligence. Government narratives blaming immigrants, like those of former Health Minister Motsoaledi's baseless allegations of a healthcare 'overburden,' validate indigenous grassroots animosity.⁶⁶ With their cooperation with smuggling networks, best shown by the *Maguma-guma* label in Musina, border officers show how state actors gain from systematic corruption while migrants face responsibility. Likewise, the extortion of migrants by law enforcement highlights what Landau defines as 'performative

⁵⁸ Crush and Chikanda, 'South-South medical tourism and the quest for health in Southern Africa.'

⁵⁹ Freedman, *Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate*.96.

⁶⁰ Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (August 1996): 377–404, <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1996.11.3.02a00050>.

⁶¹ Landau, *Contemporary Migration to South Africa: A Regional Development Issue*.14.

⁶² Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa*.38.

⁶³ Médecins Sans Frontières, *Mental Health and Trauma among Migrants in Durban*, 6"

⁶⁴ Landau, *Contemporary Migration to South Africa: A Regional Development Issue*, 9.

⁶⁵ De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life, 423."

⁶⁶ Crush and Chikanda, *South-South medical tourism and the quest for health in Southern Africa* .

governance,' in which political expediency takes front stage above rights-based remedies.⁶⁷ According to the RCCB theory, institutional inefficiencies drive young people towards rationalised exclusion; official collusion normalises violence as a 'logical' reaction to shortage. These gatekeeping policies create a self-reinforcing cycle.

The work of Alison Mountz on border enforcement clarifies how governments build 'spaces of exception' to avoid responsibility.⁶⁸ Mountz's remark that borders are locations where legal safeguards are suspended, therefore allowing systematic abuse, is reflected at South Africa's Beitbridge border, where corruption and violence abound. The *Maguma-guma* label shows how governments externalise migration control, outsourcing violence to people, by channelling young fury from corrupt officials against migrants. This is consistent with global tendencies of militarising borders while hiding governmental accountability; EU policies that outsource migrant interdiction to Libyan militias reflect this.⁶⁹

In the end, the interaction between institutional and grassroots labelling sustains what Achille Mbembe describes as 'necropolitics,' the state's ability to control who lives and who dies.⁷⁰ The necropolitical calculus of migrants excluded from healthcare during COVID-19 is best shown in South Africa.⁷¹ Scholars from Africa and beyond support decolonial strategies to destroy this. Emphasising intersectionality, Freedman and Crenshaw advocate laws that handle overlapping vulnerabilities of race, gender, and class.⁷² Rising above classifications to give universal rights top priority, Malkki advocates 'non-categorical solidarity.'⁷³ From job creation to anti-corruption policies, Landau and Fassin call for structural changes to handle the underlying causes of exclusion.⁷⁴

Grassroots designations will remain instruments of divide unless institutions balance their part in sustaining vulnerability; migrants will bear the cost of institutional failure. As Nyamnjoh emphasises, the road ahead is in centring migrant voices and redefining safety outside of colonial boundaries, a work needing both African agency and worldwide solidarity.⁷⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, it is recommended that there is a need to:

- Establish community dialogue forums: Set up local, township-based forums that bring together South African youth and migrant residents to reframe resource scarcity and unemployment as shared challenges, rather than competitive conflicts.
- Stimulate Youth Employment: Provide micro-grants, vocational training and cooperative business models to encourage local youth to form joint enterprise ventures with migrant traders.
- Targeted Anti-Stigma Campaigns: Initiate partnerships with community radio and local leaders to launch media campaigns countering misinformation about migrants, while bringing public attention to systemic problems like administrative backlogs and underinvestment.
- Mandate Frontline Anti-Discrimination Training: End medical xenophobia, denial of services and illegal extortion by requiring human rights training for police, health workers and local officials.
- Establish Independent Border Monitoring: Deploy independent monitoring teams at high-risk border crossings to audit official conduct, break down bribery networks, and promote transparent

⁶⁷ Landau, *Contemporary Migration to South Africa: A Regional Development Issue*.9.

⁶⁸ A. Mountz, *Seeking Asylum: Human Smuggling and Bureaucracy at the Border* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 24.

⁶⁹ R. Andersson, *Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 120.

⁷⁰ Mbembe, "Necropolitics."

⁷¹ K. Vanyoro, "When they come, we don't send them back': counter-narratives of 'medical xenophobia' in South Africa's public health care system"

⁷² Freedman, *Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate*; K. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43,no.6(1991): 1241–99.

⁷³ Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization."1996.

⁷⁴ Landau, *Contemporary Migration to South Africa: A Regional Development Issue*,17; D. Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011),281.

⁷⁵ Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa*.152.

border management. Systematise formal representation for migrant associations and youth leaders in municipal planning and local safety forums to ensure policy reflects ground realities. Include Affected Groups in Governance

CONCLUSION

Emerging as vanguards of the migration problem, young people have created indigenous grassroots labels to challenge supposed cultural and economic dangers. Designed by local communities, especially young people, indigenous grassroots labels are negative phrases used to challenge supposed migration-driven dangers. Rooted in resource competitiveness and cultural anxiety, these labels reinforce exclusion, bypass institutional safeguards, and mirror institutional governance flaws. Indigenous grassroots labels created by young South Africans, including *Makwerekwere*, *Maguma-guma*, and *Omalayitsha*, have shown in this article both tools of exclusion and means of resistance. Rooted in socio-economic complaints, including youth unemployment, resource competition, and systematic corruption, these labels rationalise antipathy towards immigrants by a cost-benefit logic, reflecting attempts to regain agency in settings of governmental neglect. Though justified as defensive strategies, these designations exacerbate migrant vulnerabilities by excluding access to legal rights, education, and healthcare, thereby undermining. Widespread medical xenophobia and the 2019 Johannesburg riots show how grassroots resistance reinforces cycles of violence and marginalisation, therefore highlighting the shortcomings of institutional systems in handling multidimensional displacement or safeguarding sensitive groups.

The paper addresses its main question: how can indigenous grassroots labels capture conflicts between institutionalised government shortcomings and informal resistance? By exposing a paradox: young agency, albeit founded on justified complaints, increases exclusion when institutional structures abandon accountability. Rooted in antiquated legal classification, formal migration labels ignore interlocking factors of displacement like climate change or economic collapse, therefore leaving migrants vulnerable. Concurrently, state narratives blame immigrants to justify grassroots antipathy by pointing out shortcomings of the government. This interaction emphasises the central idea of the paper: the necropolitical dynamics wherein existence depends on negotiating both official neglect and community violence, therefore separating underprivileged groups from one another.

Future research should investigate interventions bridging youth-migrant tensions, community dialogues reframing migration as shared challenges, comparative analyses of grassroots labelling and cross-border governance (particularly climate displacement), decolonial approaches centring migrant voices, and systemic reforms addressing unemployment and corruption so as to undermine exclusion.

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