Why can’t a country allow open borders and uncontrolled immigration?

Credit: Written and compiled by Tony Stone

Xenophobic sentiments and anti-immigrant marches continue to affect South African communities. These tensions are primarily driven by socioeconomic frustrations—such as high unemployment, poverty, and competition for limited resources—and are often amplified by political scapegoating.

With youth unemployment and overall poverty remaining persistently high, foreign nationals are frequently blamed for taking jobs and straining public services. Activist and vigilante movements (such as *Operation Dudula*) have frequently organized marches and engaged in the harassment of both documented and undocumented migrants. Migrants are often used as a convenient deflection from deeper structural and governance issues within South Africa.

Allowing completely open borders and uncontrolled immigration presents significant challenges to a country's infrastructure, economic stability, and social cohesion. Without regulated entry, nations struggle to manage public services, maintain wage standards, and ensure national security.

The primary reasons countries implement immigration controls include:

Public Infrastructure Strain: Uncontrolled migration can quickly overwhelm public services. Rapid population surges strain the capacity of healthcare systems, public transportation, and affordable housing, leading to shortages and diminished quality of life for both new and existing residents.

Uncontrolled immigration will strain a country's infrastructure in several distinct ways. Rapid population growth often outpaces the development of public services, leading to congested transportation networks, overcrowded housing markets, overburdened healthcare systems, and accelerated wear-and-tear on utilities and public spaces.

Here is how specific sectors are typically impacted:

- **Housing:** A sudden influx of people sharply increases demand for affordable housing. This often causes shortages, spikes in rent or property prices, and a rise in informal settlements or homelessness if the market cannot supply units fast enough.
- **Utilities & Sanitation:** Essential services like water supply, electricity, and waste management face higher consumption rates. Overuse can strain existing grids and treatment plants, requiring accelerated maintenance and capital investment.
- **Transportation:** More residents lead to increased daily commuters. Without proportional expansions in public transit, roads, and rail systems, this results in severe traffic congestion, longer commute times, and rapid deterioration of road infrastructure.
- **Healthcare:** Hospitals and clinics experience higher patient volumes. This can lead to longer waiting times, strain on emergency services, and potential shortages of medical staff or supplies if healthcare funding does not scale with the population.
- **Education:** Local school districts face sudden spikes in enrolment. This can lead to larger class sizes, a need for more teachers, and strains on facility capacity, particularly in accommodating students who require language support.

While these pressures can create significant short-term friction, the long-term economic effects often depend on the demographic and the speed of policy integration. Immigrants can also expand the labour force, filling critical gaps in construction, engineering, and service sectors necessary to build and maintain this very infrastructure.

Economic and wage impacts: A sudden influx of low-skilled labour can increase competition for entry-level jobs, potentially driving down local wages for native-born workers and legal immigrants, who have official residence and work permits. Conversely, illegal immigrants do not have residence and work permits. There is no official recognition of who they are and how many of them there are. No municipality can adequately plan for or cater for their needs either. Budgets are directly affected.

Uncontrolled immigration reshapes a country's economy by rapidly increasing the labour supply, driving up consumer demand, and straining public infrastructure as discussed above.

The specific impacts on jobs, wages, and the broader economy depend heavily on how skills match market needs.

- **Economic growth and infrastructure**
  A larger population, if employed, increases the total output of goods and services. Otherwise, they place a drain on the economy. Sudden population surges overwhelm schools, hospitals, and transit networks. Yes, more people buy food, housing, clothes, and use public transport immediately. Theoretically. tax revenue should increase, if employment increases, and is declared, but initial costs for emergency public services often outpace tax gains.

  Unfortunately, in South Africa, industries like agriculture, construction, and hospitality jobs filled quickly. So much so that South Africa's expanded unemployment rate (which includes both officially unemployed and discouraged job-seekers) is currently 43.7%. This equates to approximately 13 million people (comprising over 8.1 million officially unemployed and roughly 4.8 million people in the potential labour force). High unemployment triggers an increase in crime.

  Informal spaza type businesses grow but off-the-books hiring often spikes, bypassing official employment tracking. Worker displacement occurs as indigenous workers in low-skilled sectors face intense competition for entry-level roles.

  On the positive side, a higher demand for goods and services forces businesses to expand and hire more people.
- **Wages and compensation**
  A massive influx of entry-level workers lowers the bargaining power of low-wage labourers. Conversely, an increased demand for managers, supervisors, and specialized professionals boosts their salaries. Lower labour costs for companies increase profit margins and corporate earnings. Government policies that favour labour over automation and cheap, abundant labour reduces the incentive for companies to invest in labour-saving tech.

Fiscal burden on the welfare state: Access to publicly funded **social services**, education, and emergency healthcare requires financial planning. Unregulated migration can create imbalances, as new arrivals may consume more in localized tax-funded services than they immediately contribute.

Uncontrolled immigration impacts a country's fiscal burden on the welfare state through competing pressures: new arrivals initially increase demand for public services and social safety nets, but over the long term, they can expand the tax base and help offset demographic challenges like an aging population.

The net fiscal effect is generally determined by several key economic and social factors:

- **Tax cntributions**
  Immigrants frequently enter the workforce in high-demand sectors, paying income and consumption taxes that help fund state programs
- **Service utilisation**
  Uncontrolled immigration can strain localized resources and social services (such as public healthcare, education, and housing) before tax revenues scale to match the demand.
- **Demographic offsets**
  In nations with declining birth rates and aging populations, working-age immigrants are crucial for expanding the labour force and sustaining pension systems and social welfare funding.
- **Economic integration**
  The speed at which immigrants secure legal employment and achieve wage parity heavily dictates whether they become net contributors or long-term net receivers of state benefits.

National Security: Regulated borders allow governments to screen entrants. Without a vetting process, it becomes difficult to track the movement of criminals, potential security threats, or international trafficking networks.

Uncontrolled immigration impacts national security by creating vulnerabilities through compromised border integrity, overburdened state resources, and transnational crime. When a state loses the ability

to track who enters and resides within its borders, it faces systemic challenges that undermine sovereignty, public safety, and institutional stability.

The key areas of national security affected by uncontrolled immigration include:

- **Border integrity and state sovereignty**
  A fundamental aspect of sovereignty is a state's ability to know exactly who is within its territory. Porous borders and undocumented entries weaken the government's monopoly on territorial control. Managing large influxes of undocumented migrants redirects critical defence, intelligence, and administrative resources (like police, border management, and defence forces) away from other national security priorities.
- **Transnational crime and trafficking**
  Uncontrolled entry points are heavily exploited by criminal syndicates. These networks facilitate human trafficking, the smuggling of contraband, and arms proliferation, which directly endanger local communities and enrich violent groups. Without proper vetting, individuals with criminal records or ties to international syndicates can bypass standard background checks and enter the country, posing an elevated risk to public safety.
- **Intelligence and vetting gaps**
  The lack of biometric data collection and background screening creates a vacuum in intelligence gathering. This allows individuals affiliated with extremist groups or global terrorism to cross borders undetected and establish operational cells. Infiltration by foreign intelligence agents or operatives is vastly easier when border management and naturalization tracking systems are overwhelmed or absent.
- **Economic and societal cohesion**
  Rapid and unmanaged population influxes place immense, unexpected pressure on public infrastructure. Essential services—such as healthcare, education, housing, and social welfare systems—can become overwhelmed, affecting the standard of living for citizens. The socioeconomic stress caused by uncontrolled immigration often exacerbates local tensions. Competition for low-wage jobs, coupled with strains on state resources, can lead to protests, anti-immigrant sentiment, or violent social conflict, which threatens internal stability.

Social cohesion and integration: High volumes of immigration require time and resources for successful integration. Uncontrolled spikes can outpace the capacity for assimilation, leading to the formation of isolated communities and cultural friction.

Uncontrolled immigration impacts social cohesion and integration by outpacing a host country's ability to manage demographic change, leading to strained public services, economic anxiety, and cultural polarization. This often results in isolated immigrant communities and heightened social friction, frequently polarizing public opinion and fuelling anti-immigrant sentiment.

The specific impacts on social cohesion and integration generally fall into four main categories:

- **Strained infrastructure and public services**
  A rapid, unmanaged influx of newcomers creates immediate pressure on housing, schools, and healthcare facilities. When local populations face perceived or real inequalities in accessing these scarce resources, it fuels resentment and community divisions.
- **Economic anxiety**
  Influxes of low-skilled labor can distort local labor markets and lead to wage suppression, generating fierce economic anxiety among working-class host populations. This environment makes it easy for populations to scapegoat migrants for structural economic problems, undermining mutual trust.]
- **Cultural polarization**
  Without structured civic and linguistic integration programs, immigrants frequently cluster into isolated enclaves rather than assimilating. This separation limits social mixing, prevents the

development of shared national values, and is often perceived by the native population as a threat to their national identity.

- **Erosion of institutional trust**
  The inability of state institutions to manage borders, process claims efficiently, or enforce local laws weakens public confidence in the government. This institutional breakdown breeds social fragmentation and fosters an environment of fear and mutual mistrust among different demographic groups.

Uncontrolled immigration is rarely the result of a single event. Rather, it stems from systemic policy failures that break down legal pathways, weaken border enforcement, and create administrative backlogs.

In South Africa's case, a primary structural failure has occurred with the state's immigration infrastructure is chronically under-resourced and mismanaged. Systemic bribery within immigration departments allows for the fraudulent issuance of visas, passports, and work permits, completely undermining official quotas (if there were any).

Border security, police, and intelligence agencies often fail to share real-time data, leaving geographical blind spots along land and sea borders. Treating irregular entry strictly as a migrant issue—rather than targeting the lucrative organized crime syndicates that facilitate it—allows human smuggling infrastructure to operate unchecked.

Once inside a country, the lack of strict domestic oversight acts as a major "pull factor" for uncontrolled migration. The ANC government has until recent amendments to labour law failed to penalize businesses that exploit undocumented labour. Without workplace status-verification systems or meaningful fines for employers, an unregulated, informal shadow economy flourishes. Failing to monitor visa overstays means that individuals who entered legally but let their visas expire can simply disappear into the domestic population without detection.

South Africa has often failed to use foreign aid, trade agreements, or diplomatic pressure to stabilize failing economies or political crises in neighbouring states, especially Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

There is no exact or officially verified figure for the number of illegal immigrants in South Africa, as they are undocumented. Estimates from institutions like Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) and migration researchers typically range between 4 million and 5 million undocumented individuals residing in the country. Some political groups have estimated the number of illegal immigrants to be as high as 10 to 15 million people. This number has however been debunked by the ANC.

Last but not least, Julius Malema keeps demanding South Africa to open its borders and extends an open invitation to Africa to come and live in South Africa. He simply has no clue of the impact mass immigration will have on South Africa.

Anti-immigration groups—most notably the "March and March" movement—have set June 30, 2026, as an ominous deadline for undocumented foreign nationals to leave the country. While organizers claim their protest will be a peaceful, million-man shutdown to demand government action on immigration, there are severe fears of widespread unrest, looting, and vigilantism.

The South African Police Service (SAPS) and NATJOINTS have stated that they have operational plans in place to maintain law and order. Defence Minister Angie Motshekga has urged the public not to panic, stating that lawlessness and vigilantism will not be tolerated. Law enforcement is conducting ongoing, multi-disciplinary operations to arrest and deport undocumented immigrants.

The end of June is around the corner. So far, nine foreign nationals have been officially reported killed in South Africa during the May and June 2026.

One death is one too many.