

# Decolonise: Open Africa's borders

The continent needs a humane migration policy in a world that is anti-migrant and anti-black

MIGRANCY  
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I am one of those who are actively committed to the idea of a borderless Africa. I believe in the project of an African nationality as articulated by the best of our thinkers in the continent and in the diaspora since the 19th century.

This project includes the possibility for people of African descent scattered throughout the world to resettle in Africa if so they wish.

This is what the 2000 Ghana Immigration Act calls “the right of abode”.

Last weekend, I attended a policy conference on international migration in Sandton at which Home Affairs Minister Malusi Gigaba gave a rousing speech.

Since taking over the department of home affairs, Gigaba has been outspoken about the fact that “South Africa is an African country in Africa”. “Our first focus,” he has consistently argued, “is Africa.” He has gone as far as calling for an “Afrocentric” international migration policy.

In so doing, he has thrown to all of us who care a challenge that is not only a policy challenge, but also an intellectual one and it is in relation to the intellectual nature of this challenge that what follows makes sense.

An Africa-centered international migration policy requires a radical altering of the South African legal immigration framework.

In spite of consecutive amendments since the advent of democracy, the latter is still in spirit and in soul too reliant on colonial and apartheid-era racial assumptions.

At their core, colonial and apartheid-era immigration policies were explicitly anti-African and anti-black.

It hardly mattered where they came from. Whites entered South Africa through the front door; blacks from other African countries through the back door, Indians as indentured labour and native black South Africans through the dark tunnel of the pass system.

Gigaba's call for an Africa-centered international migration policy requires a genuine change of paradigm in the management of intra-African migration.

The same change of paradigm is necessary if we are to contribute meaningfully to the unfolding global debate on human mobility in this age of planetary entanglement.

In a world in which arrest, detention, incarceration (including at sea), abandonment and deportation are seen as the most efficient ways of dealing with economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, we should draw from our own historical experience as African and diasporic people, and articulate a proposal for ourselves and for the world that is radi-

cally different from the anti-humanist norms and practices prevalent on matters concerning the management of human mobility.

At a deep historical level, African and diasporic struggles for freedom and self-determination have always been intertwined with the aspiration to move unchained. Whether under conditions of slavery (Atlantic and trans-Saharan) or under colonial rule, the loss of our sovereignty automatically resulted in the loss of our right to free movement.

This is the reason the dream of a free, redeemed and mighty African nation — a “bright star among the constellation of nations” as Marcus Garvey, a proponent of black nationalism and pan-Africanism, once put it — was inextricably linked to the recovery of the right to come and go without let or hindrance across this colossal continent.

Our history in modernity has been, to a large extent, one of constant displacement and confinement, forced migrations and coerced labour. Think of the plantation system in the Americas and the Caribbean. Think of the “black codes”, the “Pig laws” and the vagrancy statutes after the failure of Reconstruction in the United States in 1877. Think of the chain gangs labouring at tasks such as road construction, ditch digging and farming.

Think, too, of the Code de l'indigénat in French colonial Africa, a set of laws establishing an inferior legal status for local people, of the Bantustans and labour reserves in Southern Africa and of the carceral industrial complex in today's US.

In each instance, to be African and to be black has meant to be consigned to one or the other of the many spaces of confinement modernity invented.

The scramble for Africa in the 19th century and the carving of its boundaries along colonial lines turned the continent into a carceral space and each of us into a potential illegal migrant unable to move except under increasingly punitive conditions.

Entrapment became the precondition for the exploitation of our labour, which is why the struggles for emancipation and racial upliftment were so intertwined with the struggles for the right to move freely. To complete the project of decolonisation, this is the historical legacy of racial violence we must systematically undo. Any Africa-centered international migration policy for the 21st century will, of necessity, subscribe to this abolitionist agenda.

It will be a policy that makes it possible for Africans and people of African descent across the globe to move unhindered across our colonial borders and to settle wherever they desire in this colossal continent turned, almost by design, into a mass penitentiary.

Such a policy will protect every

single African or person of African descent from the humiliation of being made to feel or be treated as a stranger in Africa. It will subscribe to a project of openness and circulation rather than of closure and immobilisation.

Anything that, in the name of “national interest”, “national security” or any other pretext goes against this goal is by definition anti-African and anti-black. But this is where the conundrum starts.

South Africa under black majority rule cannot possibly be pro-black and yet anti-African. Nor can it be anti-black and pro-African.

To be sure, worldwide the nation-state system is still the norm. In the name of national sovereignty, each national state on Earth has the right to allow in — or to keep out — whoever it deems undesirable.

South Africa cannot be asked to unilaterally share its sovereignty over its borders or to surrender it while other African states keep theirs for themselves.

Opening African borders or abolishing them will be a gradual, mutual and reciprocal endeavour or it simply won't happen.

South Africa cannot legitimately be asked to attend alone to every single economic migrant in Africa. Nor can it alone shoulder the plight of every single African refugee or asylum seeker.

Furthermore, it cannot be expected to minimise contemporary real and actual threats such as terrorism, the smuggling of drugs and firearms, the illegal export of stolen cars and endangered species, human trafficking and the deleterious activities of criminal syndicates. These are crude facts we need to acknowledge and relentlessly combat.

And yet under international law, South Africa has the duty to treat in the most humane way each of those who knock at its door, those it chooses to keep out and those it

chooses to let in.

Whether this has always been the case should remain an open question, especially when hundreds of thousands of Africans are deported every single year while a few thousands are held at any given time in detention within South African borders.

South Africa has to exercise its sovereignty over its own territory and fulfill its international obligations mindful of the fact that, over the past decade, its companies have aggressively moved into the continent in search of markets, resources and cheap labour. In most instances, the penetration of South African capital into the rest of the continent has entrenched historical patterns of regional inequality and processes of accumulation based on low wages. Such has been the case in mining, telecommunications, banking, retail and food.

The country's investment stock in Africa has increased from R14.7-billion in 2001 to R121-billion in 2010. The rest of Africa is South Africa's fastest-growing export destination after Asia.

If the European Union remains the single most important import source for South Africa, exports from South Africa to the continent have steadily increased since 2009. In fact, they have been growing at a faster rate than with any other trading partner, China included. In devising a new immigration policy, a proper appraisal of our “national interests” must take this into account.

In the long run, the future cannot be built on mercantilism on the one hand and resegregation on the other. Something else must be done.

Opening African borders requires of each African state to put its house in order. This starts with putting in place efficient mechanisms of civil registration and citizen identification. As a first step towards the goal of a borderless Africa, South Africa can take the lead in a vast programme aiming at the continental harmonisation of civil registration and citizen identification.

Because of the unparalleled hegemony northern countries enjoy in defining pretty much anything that matters, the global debate on immigration and human mobility has been mostly conducted through categories of thought originating

from that part of the world.

As a result, international migrations have been mostly addressed through the prism of those countries' national interests, national sovereignty, national security, the mitigation of risks, the anticipation of threats and eventually their nullification.

Such concepts depend on a Western metaphysics of space, power and movement that is profoundly anti-humanist, tethered as it is to the overwhelming figure of a mortal enemy in a fundamentally hostile world. No wonder they are mostly mobilised by right-wing political forces in their attempts to bolster racism and Islamophobia. As far as Africa is concerned, we have to ask whose interests are better served when we import such categories wholesale and frame the question of African mobility in those terms.

To answer Gigaba's call for an Africa-centered international migration policy, a genuine decolonisation of our categories of thought and our conceptions of history, power and space is unavoidable.

In our traditions, space is about flows, networks and circulation. Crossroads and intersections are more important than borders. How flows intersect with other flows is what matters the most. Social and political membership is constantly negotiated. It is never closed. Building alliances through trade, marriages, religion or incorporating latecomers is the norm.

To come up with an entirely different paradigm consonant with the deep spirit of our own history, we explicitly need to embrace our long-held traditions of flexible, networked sovereignty, mutual security, integration through incorporation and of universal right to temporary sojourn (ethics of hospitality).

Coming from a people that has experienced first-hand the violence of history, such a paradigm is not naive about the brutality of our world. Nor does it espouse the anti-humanist and nihilistic impulses of our times.

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