

Borders, Sovereignty, and Security: Rethinking South Africa's Governance and Approach to Irregular Migration and Transnational Threats.

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ABSTRACT

Border control has emerged as a critical dimension of national security in states confronting irregular migration, organized crime, and transnational threats. South Africa illustrates these tensions as a regional hub with porous borders, liberalized immigration policies, and treaty obligations. Despite the creation of the Border Management Authority (BMA), institutional fragmentation, corruption, and resource deficits persist. Employing qualitative methods and using both primary and secondary data, this study traces the evolution of border governance from apartheid to democracy, analyzes policy frameworks, and identifies challenges undermining effectiveness. It highlights the security and socioeconomic consequences of weak border control, including xenophobia, terrorism, and erosion of legitimacy. Drawing on realism, liberalism, and open systems theory, the article argues that effective border management requires integrated agency cooperation, technological innovation, and regional collaboration to safeguard sovereignty and stability.

Keywords: Border Control, Irregular Migration, National Security, Sovereignty, porous border, Xenophobia.

INTRODUCTION

Borders are more than geographical demarcations; they embody sovereignty, identity, and security. In the contemporary era, the management of borders has become a decisive factor in national security, with states that fail to secure them facing heightened exposure to transnational organized crimes, terrorism, irregular migration, and socioeconomic instability (Andreas, 2003). Globalization, while enabling trade and mobility, has simultaneously created vulnerabilities that criminal networks and extremist groups exploit (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014).

South Africa's experience illustrates these dynamics vividly. As the most industrialized economy on the continent, coupled with a progressive human rights regime, it attracts migrants from across Africa and beyond. While many arrive legally, significant numbers cross irregularly, facilitated by porous borders and weak enforcement mechanisms (Peberdy, 2001, Department of Home Affairs, 2026). This influx has generated opportunities — such as contributions to the labor force and cultural diversity — but also challenges, including rising crime, corruption, xenophobic violence, and strains on public services (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010; Mbiyozo, 2026).

Institutional reforms, most notably the creation of the Border Management Authority (BMA) in 2013, sought to centralize enforcement and improve coordination. Yet fragmentation among agencies such as the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), and the South African Police Service (SAPS) has limited effectiveness (Malatji, 2023). The result is a system struggling to balance humanitarian obligations with security imperatives amid rising non-traditional threats.

This study therefore examines the role of border control in safeguarding South Africa's national security. Specifically, it assesses the effectiveness of current border governance, evaluates inter-agency interoperability, identifies factors contributing to border porosity, and analyzes the security and socioeconomic risks posed by

irregular migration. By situating South Africa's case within theoretical frameworks of open systems theory, realism, and liberalism, the article highlights the need for integrated strategies that reconcile sovereignty, security, and humanitarian commitments.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach involving a qualitative design complemented by descriptive statistical analysis to investigate the role of border control in safeguarding South Africa's national security. The complexity of border governance, involving institutional fragmentation, irregular migration, and competing imperatives of sovereignty and humanitarian obligations, required a methodological approach that could capture both lived experiences and empirical patterns. Fieldwork was conducted between May and July 2026, during which 86 semi-structured interviews were carried out. Participants included officials from the Department of Home Affairs, the South African National Defence Force, the South African Police Service, the Border Management Authority, and the South African Revenue Service. To ensure a holistic perspective, the study also incorporated interviews with foreign nationals, both documented and undocumented, who reside in South Africa. Their inclusion was critical in understanding how border governance and immigration enforcement are experienced by those directly affected, particularly in relation to xenophobia, corruption, and access to services. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with sensitivity afforded to foreign nationals, especially those undocumented, to ensure that participation did not expose them to legal or social risks. Secondary sources included government policy documents, legislative frameworks, annual reports, and publications from international organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Statistics South Africa. Academic literature and prior studies on border governance, migration, and security were also consulted to provide theoretical and comparative grounding.

In addition to qualitative interviews, the study employed descriptive statistics to analyze data obtained from various departments, including Home Affairs, SAPS, and Statistics South Africa. This quantitative component provided estimates of irregular migration, patterns of overstays, and recorded incidents of smuggling and trafficking. The use of descriptive statistics allowed the study to contextualize qualitative findings within broader empirical trends, thereby strengthening the reliability of conclusions. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of recurring patterns such as institutional fragmentation, resource deficits, corruption, and politicization of immigration. Triangulation between interview data, documentary evidence, and statistical records enhanced validity and minimized bias.

In terms of the study limitations, while the inclusion of 86 interviews provided rich insights, access to certain high-level officials was restricted. Reliance on unofficial accounts from Home Affairs staff may reflect subjective perspectives. Furthermore, descriptive statistics were limited by the availability and reliability of departmental data, which is often fragmented. Nonetheless, triangulation across multiple sources mitigated these limitations and ensured a balanced and credible analysis.

Historical Evolution of Border Control in South Africa

The history of border management in South Africa is inseparable from the broader political and social context of apartheid. Prior to 1994, border control was not primarily about regulating migration in the conventional sense but about enforcing racial segregation and maintaining the apartheid state's political order. The government implemented rigid measures to restrict the movement of Black South Africans, particularly from the Bantustans into urban areas, while simultaneously excluding "undesirable" foreigners (Posel, 1991).

Internally, the notorious *pass laws* required Black South Africans to carry identification documents to justify their presence in "white" urban areas. These laws effectively turned internal borders into instruments of racial control (Breckenridge, 2014). Externally, the apartheid regime sought and effectively managed to prevent the entry of political dissidents and migrants from neighboring states, fearing that liberation movements could destabilize its rule (Crush, 1997).

Thus, border control during apartheid was twofold: externally, it sought to exclude foreigners deemed politically or racially undesirable; internally, it restricted the mobility of the majority population. This dual system reflected

the regime's obsession with racial purity and political dominance. Internationally, South Africa faced widespread condemnation for these practices, yet they remained effective in enforcing apartheid policies until the early 1990s; allowing entry only to people deemed desirable by the regime.

The democratic transition in 1994 marked a turning point in South Africa's approach to border management. The new government inherited the 1991 *Alien's Control Act*, which was widely criticized for its discriminatory provisions (Peberdy, 2001). While the Act remained in force for a time, the post-apartheid state sought to align immigration policies with international human rights treaties and democratic ideals.

South Africa's reintegration into the international community required it to become a signatory to numerous treaties and conventions, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and various UN conventions (Handmaker, 2009). These commitments compelled South Africa to uphold refugee rights and fundamental freedoms, even as it grappled with domestic pressures.

The liberalization of immigration policy had unintended consequences. South Africa quickly became a magnet for migrants across the continent, including refugees fleeing wars in distant countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Burundi, Rwanda and Somalia, as well as economic migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi and Nigeria (Dodson, 2010). The porous nature of African borders facilitated this influx, overwhelming South Africa's enforcement capacity. While Statistics South Africa (2022) estimated the number of illegal immigrants to 3.96 million (Hoffman, 2025), the number of undocumented might even be far greater given that most of those who cross illegal from neighboring countries do not report to Home Affairs for documentation.

Recognizing the challenges posed by porous borders, the South African government sought to establish institutional frameworks to strengthen enforcement. The most significant development was the creation of the Border Management Authority (BMA) in 2013. The BMA was tasked with ensuring effective and efficient border law enforcement functions at all ports of entry and along the border line. Its mandate included coordinating the activities of multiple agencies involved in border management, such as the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), and the South African Police Service (SAPS) (Dithebe & Mukhuba, 2018).

Despite its ambitious mandate, the BMA has struggled to fulfill its role effectively. Coordination among agencies remains weak, with each institution pursuing its own doctrines and interests. The SANDF focuses on military security, SAPS on crime prevention, and DHA on immigration control, while the BMA attempts to integrate these functions. The lack of harmonization undermines the effectiveness of border management, allowing irregular migration and transnational crime to flourish (Malatji, 2023. Department of Home Affairs, 2026).

The Rise of Non-Traditional Security Threats

Since the end of the Cold War, the global security landscape has shifted from interstate rivalries to non-traditional security threats. For South Africa, these include terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and corruption (Andreas, 2003) to name just few. Porous borders have facilitated the entry of criminal networks and extremist groups, posing significant risks to national security.

Studies have highlighted the role of irregular migration in enabling transnational crime. Criminals and traffickers exploit weak border enforcement to smuggle arms, drugs, and humans into South Africa. The Department of Home Affairs has identified trafficking in small arms valued between \$1.7–\$3.5 billion annually, as well as organ trafficking valued between \$840 million–\$1.7 billion (UNODC, 2020). These illicit activities disrupt internal order and undermine the state's legitimacy.

The influx of irregular migrants has also contributed to socioeconomic tensions. Competition for jobs and services has fueled xenophobic violence across the country, while corruption in public services has increased as officials exploit migrants' vulnerability (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010). These dynamics illustrate the complex interplay between border management, security, and socioeconomic stability.

Policy Gaps and Institutional Weaknesses

Despite the presence of multiple agencies at the borders, enforcement remains weak. Many institutions lack the human capacity and resources to discharge their tasks effectively (Miruka, 2014; Department of Home Affairs, 2026). Border posts are often understaffed and under-resourced, leaving them overwhelmed or, in some cases, obsolete (Peberdy, 2001; Department of Home Affairs, 2026).

Furthermore, according to unofficial accounts from Home Affairs staff interviewed, the lack of coordination among different agencies exacerbates these challenges. Each institution operates according to its own mandate, with little effort to harmonize activities. This fragmentation undermines the effectiveness of border management and facilitates irregular and illegal migration (Dithebe & Mukhuba, 2018).

More so, policy gaps persist. While South Africa has committed to international treaties, domestic policies often fail to balance humanitarian obligations with security imperatives. For instance, the open border policy through which citizens of most of SADC member countries with a valid passport may enter South Africa without a valid visa creates domestic security challenges by enabling irregular migration, overstays, and undocumented employment, which in turn may fuel crime, xenophobia, and strain on public services. In 2022, 83.5% of South Africa's 2.4 million migrants came from neighboring SADC states, with Zimbabwe alone accounting for nearly half. Through that policy, it is easier for criminals or other people in SADC who would otherwise be undesirable to decide to come to South Africa without legally acceptable motives and means to sustain their stay. Weak enforcement of stay limits and border monitoring makes it easier for criminal networks and smugglers to exploit the system, undermining national security. The result is a system that struggles to regulate migration effectively while safeguarding national security (Handmaker, 2009).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Border management is not only a practical issue of enforcement but also a conceptual one that requires theoretical grounding. Security studies provide multiple lenses through which the role of border control can be understood. In this section, three major frameworks are applied: open systems theory, realism and neorealism, and liberalism and international cooperation. Each offers distinct insights into how states conceptualize and implement border management, and together they provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing South Africa's case.

Open Systems Theory

Open systems theory emphasizes the interdependence of systems and subsystems. In this framework, national security is the overarching system, while border management is one of its critical subsystems. The effectiveness of the main system depends on the performance and coordination of its subsystems (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Applied to South Africa, this theory suggests that border management cannot function in isolation. Agencies such as the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), the South African Police Service (SAPS), and the Border Management Authority (BMA) must operate in harmony. If one subsystem fails — for example, if SAPS lacks resources to combat border crime — the entire security system is weakened (Malatji, 2023).

The strength of open systems lies in its emphasis on coordination and synergy. It highlights the need for integrated strategies that bring together diverse actors under a unified framework. However, the challenge lies in overcoming institutional boundaries and bureaucratic silos. In South Africa, overlapping responsibilities and fragmented mandates have undermined cooperation, illustrating the difficulties of applying open systems theory in practice (Dithebe & Mukhuba, 2018).

Realism and Neorealism

Realism, rooted in the work of scholars such as Hans Morgenthau (1948), views security as the core interest of states. States exist in an anarchic international system where survival depends on maximizing power and protecting sovereignty. Neorealism, particularly Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, emphasizes the distribution of power in the international system and the constraints it imposes on state behavior (Waltz, 1979).

From a realist perspective, border management is a fundamental tool for safeguarding sovereignty. By controlling entry and exit, states protect themselves from external threats and maintain internal stability. For South Africa, porous borders represent a direct challenge to sovereignty, exposing the country to irregular migration, transnational crime, and potential extremist infiltration (Crush, 1997).

Realism underscores the security imperative of border control. It suggests that South Africa must prioritize enforcement even if it conflicts with humanitarian obligations. Neorealism adds a structural dimension, highlighting how South Africa's position in the regional system influences its border management. As a continental hub, South Africa attracts migrants from weaker neighboring states, creating asymmetrical pressures that complicate enforcement (Peberdy, 2001).

The limitation of realism is its tendency to downplay humanitarian considerations. By focusing solely on security and sovereignty, it risks neglecting South Africa's obligations under international treaties. Nonetheless, realism provides a valuable lens for understanding the urgency of border management in protecting national security.

Liberalism and International Cooperation

In contrast to realism, liberalism emphasizes cooperation, institutions, and shared norms. States are not only driven by security imperatives but also by commitments to international law and human rights. Liberalism highlights the role of treaties, conventions, and organizations in shaping state behavior (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

Applied to South Africa, liberalism explains the post-1994 liberalization of immigration policies. Reintegration into the international community required the country to align its laws with global norms, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Handmaker, 2009). These commitments compelled South Africa to uphold refugee rights and fundamental freedoms, even as it faced domestic pressures.

Liberalism also emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation. South Africa cannot secure its borders in isolation; it must work with neighboring states through organizations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU). Regional collaboration is essential for addressing transnational crime and managing migration flows (Dodson, 2010).

The limitation of liberalism is its potential to underestimate the security risks of porous borders. By prioritizing cooperation and rights, it may overlook the practical challenges of enforcement. Nonetheless, liberalism provides a crucial lens for understanding South Africa's obligations and the tension between security and humanitarian commitments.

Integrating Theories: A Holistic Approach

No single theory fully captures the complexities of border management. Open systems theory emphasizes coordination, realism underscores sovereignty, and liberalism highlights cooperation. Together, they provide a holistic framework for analyzing South Africa's case.

By integrating these perspectives, policymakers can develop strategies that balance security imperatives with humanitarian commitments. For South Africa, this means strengthening enforcement while upholding refugee rights, enhancing coordination among agencies, and collaborating with regional partners. Failure to balance these imperatives risks undermining both security and legitimacy.

Institutional And Policy Frameworks

Border management in South Africa is characterized by a multi-agency approach involving several institutions with overlapping mandates. While this structure reflects the complexity of border security, it has also created challenges of coordination, resource allocation, and policy coherence. This section examines the roles of the key institutions — the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), the South African Police Service (SAPS), the South African Revenue Service (SARS), and the Border Management Authority (BMA) — and analyzes the policy frameworks guiding their operations.

Department of Home Affairs (DHA)

The DHA is the primary agency responsible for regulating human mobility. Its mandate includes issuing visas, permits, and identity documents, as well as enforcing immigration laws. At border posts, DHA officials are tasked with processing travelers, verifying documentation, and identifying irregular migrants (Department of Home Affairs, 2026).

Despite its central role, the DHA faces significant challenges. Many border posts are understaffed, and officials often lack the training and resources needed to detect fraudulent documents or identify trafficking victims. Corruption within the department has further undermined its credibility, with officials accused of selling permits or facilitating irregular migration (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010).

Policy frameworks guiding the DHA include the Immigration Act of 2002 and the Refugees Act of 1998, both of which attempt to balance humanitarian obligations with enforcement. However, critics argue that these frameworks remain fragmented and inconsistently applied (Handmaker, 2009).

South African National Defence Force (SANDF)

SANDF plays a critical role in border security, particularly along land borders. Its mandate includes preventing illegal crossings, combating smuggling, and supporting law enforcement agencies in maintaining territorial integrity (Dithebe & Mukhuba, 2018).

However, the SANDF has faced resource constraints since the 1990s, with budget cuts limiting its ability to patrol borders effectively. Many border areas remain unmonitored, allowing irregular migration and transnational crime to flourish (Malatji, 2023).

The SANDF's involvement in border management is guided by the Defence Act of 2002, which authorizes military support for civil authorities. Yet, critics argue that the militarization of border control risks undermining human rights, particularly when soldiers are deployed to manage refugee flows and other civilian migrants (Dodson, 2010).

South African Police Service (SAPS)

SAPS is responsible for crime prevention at borders and ports of entry. Its mandate includes investigating smuggling, trafficking, and organized crime. SAPS works closely with DHA and SANDF but often struggles with coordination and resource allocation (Crush, 1997).

One of SAPS's major challenges is corruption. Reports have documented instances of police officers colluding with smugglers and traffickers, undermining enforcement efforts (UNODC, 2020). Furthermore, SAPS lacks specialized training in border security, limiting its effectiveness in combating complex transnational crimes.

Policy frameworks guiding SAPS include the South African Police Service Act of 1995, which emphasizes crime prevention and law enforcement. However, the Act does not provide clear guidelines for border management, leaving SAPS with an ambiguous role in enforcement.

South African Revenue Service (SARS)

SARS plays a less visible but equally important role in border management. Its mandate includes regulating customs and excise duties, preventing tax evasion, and combating smuggling of goods. SARS officials are stationed at ports of entry, where they inspect cargo and enforce trade regulations (Peberdy, 2001).

SARS has been relatively effective in combating smuggling, particularly of cigarettes and alcohol. However, resource constraints and corruption remain challenges. Smuggling syndicates often exploit weak enforcement to evade taxes, depriving the state of revenue and undermining economic stability (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010).

Border Management Authority (BMA)

The creation of the BMA in 2013 was intended to centralize and strengthen border enforcement. The BMA's mandate includes coordinating the activities of DHA, SANDF, SAPS, and SARS, ensuring effective and efficient border law enforcement functions at all ports of entry and along the border line (Dithebe & Mukhuba, 2018).

Despite its ambitious mandate, the BMA has struggled to fulfill its role effectively. Coordination among agencies remains weak, with each institution pursuing its own doctrines and interests. The lack of harmonization undermines the effectiveness of border management, allowing irregular migration and transnational crime to flourish (Malatji, 2023). Critics argue that the BMA has become another layer of bureaucracy rather than a solution to fragmentation. Without adequate resources and political support, the BMA risks replicating the inefficiencies of existing institutions (Dodson, 2010).

Policy Frameworks

South Africa's border management is guided by a range of policies and laws, including:

- **Immigration Act of 2002:** Regulates entry, residence, and departure of foreign nationals.
- **Refugees Act of 1998:** Provides for the recognition and protection of refugees.
- **Defence Act of 2002:** Authorizes SANDF involvement in border security.
- **South African Police Service Act of 1995:** Defines SAPS's role in law enforcement.
- **Customs and Excise Act of 1964:** Governs SARS's role in regulating trade.

While these frameworks provide a legal basis for border management, they remain fragmented and inconsistently applied. The lack of a unified strategy to implement these frameworks undermines enforcement and creates opportunities for irregular migration and transnational crimes (Handmaker, 2009).

Consequences of Institutional Fragmentation

The multi-agency approach has created significant challenges that undermine effectiveness and credibility. One of the most pressing issues is the overlapping mandates of these institutions. Agencies often duplicate efforts, leading to wasted resources and inefficiencies. For example, both SANDF and SAPS patrol border areas, but with different priorities, resulting in duplication rather than synergy. This overlap not only drains limited resources but also creates confusion in enforcement practices.

Closely related is the lack of coordination among institutions. Agencies frequently operate in silos, pursuing their own mandates without harmonization. The absence of a unified strategy undermines synergy and weakens the overall security system. The BMA was established to address this fragmentation, yet without adequate resources and political support, it risks becoming another bureaucratic layer rather than a solution. The problem is compounded by resource deficits. Many border posts are understaffed and under-resourced, with insufficient personnel, outdated technology, and inadequate funding. These deficits leave enforcement agencies overwhelmed and unable to discharge their responsibilities effectively, creating vulnerabilities that criminal networks exploit. Another critical challenge is corruption. Officials across agencies have been accused of exploiting migrants' vulnerability, whether through the sale of permits, facilitation of irregular migration, or collusion with smuggling networks. Such practices erode institutional credibility and weaken public trust in border governance.

Finally, policy gaps persist. Domestic laws often fail to balance humanitarian obligations with security imperatives. For instance, visa-free entry for citizens of most SADC states facilitates mobility but also enables irregular migration, overstays, and undocumented employment. Weak domestic enforcement of stay limits exacerbates these risks, undermining national security while fueling xenophobia and socioeconomic tensions. Taken together, these challenges highlight the urgent need for a more integrated and coherent approach to border control and management.

Challenges In Border Management

Despite institutional reforms and the establishment of the Border Management Authority (BMA), South Africa continues to face significant challenges in securing its borders. These challenges are multifaceted, involving structural weaknesses, resource constraints, corruption, and socio-political tensions. They not only undermine enforcement but also exacerbate national security risks. This section explores the major challenges in detail, highlighting their implications for governance and stability.

Porosity of Borders

South Africa's borders are notoriously porous, allowing irregular migration, smuggling, and trafficking to flourish. The country shares land borders with six states — Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Eswatini, and Lesotho — many of which are characterized by long, sparsely monitored stretches of terrain (Crush, 1997).

Weak enforcement capacity means that migrants and smugglers often cross undetected. Studies have shown that informal crossing points outnumber official border posts, making regulation nearly impossible (Peberdy, 2001). This porosity facilitates not only irregular migration but also the movement of arms, drugs, and contraband, undermining national security (UNODC, 2020).

The challenge of porous borders is compounded by geography. Rivers, mountains, and rural terrain make surveillance difficult, while communities living along borders often rely on cross-border trade and mobility for survival, blurring the line between legal and illegal movement (Dodson, 2010).

Fragmented Coordination

As stated above, border management in South Africa involves multiple agencies — DHA, SANDF, SAPS, SARS, and the BMA — each with overlapping mandates. This multi-agency approach has created significant coordination problems. Agencies often operate in silos, pursuing their own priorities rather than working toward a unified strategy (Dithebe & Mukhuba, 2018). The lack of harmonization undermines operational efficiency. For example, SAPS may focus on crime prevention while SANDF prioritizes territorial security, leading to duplication of efforts and gaps in enforcement. This institutional fragmentation reflects broader governance challenges in South Africa, where bureaucratic competition and lack of accountability often weaken policy implementation in various sectors (Handmaker, 2009).

Politicization of Immigration Policies

Party politics in South Africa contribute to ineffective border management by turning immigration into a polarizing electoral issue, where competing political agendas, ideological divides, and populist rhetoric undermine coherent policy and enforcement. Instead of unified strategies, parties exploit border control for votes, leading to inconsistent implementation, weak coordination, and heightened xenophobia (Khumalo, 2026). South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), has historically emphasized balancing enforcement with humanitarian obligations. However, opposition parties such as the Democratic Alliance (DA), ActionSA and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) frame immigration differently:

- The DA stresses lawful enforcement but argues that economic mismanagement, not migrants, is the real problem. ActionSA and MK Party of former President Jacob Zuma call for mass deportations and stricter enforcement, often using populist rhetoric to mobilize voters against the ANC.
- The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) adopt a distinctive stance on immigration compared to parties that emphasize stricter enforcement. The EFF argues that colonial borders artificially divide African people and they promote free movement of Africans across the continent, seeing migration as part of building solidarity and economic integration. They frame anti-immigrant sentiment as a distraction from deeper issues like unemployment, inequality, and corruption.

In the lead up to the November 2026 local government elections, immigration has become a vote-winning issue.

Parties exploit public anxieties about unemployment, crime, and strained public services by blaming migrants. Particularly for former President Jacob Zuma, it defies the logic for him to condemn the ANC and the government for immigration failures because he himself presided over both the party and the state for nearly a decade, during which the very structural weaknesses he now criticizes were entrenched. As president, Zuma had the authority and responsibility to strengthen border management, improve institutional coordination, and craft coherent immigration policies, yet his administration was marked by policy paralysis, corruption scandals, and a lack of decisive reforms. To now position himself as a critic of the ANC's failures on immigration is contradictory, since the current challenges are in large part a legacy of his own leadership (Grootes, 2026). His condemnation therefore appears less like a principled stance and more like political opportunism, seeking to distance himself from problems he helped perpetuate.

Such politicization and the subsequent public outcry often lead to short-term populist measures—such as symbolic crackdowns and mass deportations—rather than long-term reforms like modernizing border technology, mapping of undocumented migrants, domestic enforcement of immigration laws or strengthening regional cooperation with the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Civil society is also divided between groups advocating stricter enforcement and those defending migrant rights. Political parties align with these factions, deepening divisions and creating policy deadlock. Government agencies often receive conflicting directives, particularly now that the state is run by a coalition of different political parties with different policies and ideological orientation, weakening institutional capacity and enforcement consistency. These conflicting positions prevent the development of a unified national strategy, leaving border management inconsistent and reactive rather than proactive.

Resource Deficits

Resource constraints are a major obstacle to effective border management. Many border posts are understaffed, under-resourced, and technologically outdated. Officials often lack training in detecting fraudulent documents, identifying trafficking victims, or combating organized crime (Peberdy, 2001; Miruka, 2014). Lack of proper budget affects both the performance of the institution and of its employees. At Home Affairs for instance, lack of proper allocation of resources to BMA leads to ineffective control of borders due to shortage of staff and equipment. According to the portfolio Committee on Home Affairs (2026), the Department is tasked to discharge tasks that require specialized training that guarantee performance and productivity. Yet there is imbalance between demand and capacity both in terms of skills and number of personnel required to discharge specific tasks. This has wide ranging implications including immense pressure on employees, burnout, slower turnaround times and risk of administrative errors. For instance, there is a chronic under-capacitation with critical offices such as Mpumalanga operating at 32% and Limpopo at 42%, yet these Provinces serve as transit areas for most of illegal immigrants coming to South Africa.

Budgetary limitations have also affected SANDF deployment, reducing its capacity to patrol borders effectively. Reports indicate that soldiers are often deployed without adequate equipment, leaving vast stretches of border unmonitored (Department of Home Affairs, 2026; Crush & Ramachandran, 2010).

Technology deficits further weaken enforcement. While biometric systems and smart surveillance have been introduced in some areas, coverage remains limited. Criminal networks exploit these gaps, using sophisticated methods to evade detection (UNODC, 2020). In its own 2018 assessment, in its own 2018 assessment of how Batho Pele Principles were being implemented, the Department of Home Affairs recognized that although it was transiting old legacy system to digital system, the institution was struggling with network connectivity and IT equipment, causing delays in delivery of services (Department of Home Affairs, 2022:214). Although efforts were made by entering into a trilateral agreement with Sita and Dimension Data, ICT issues persist and affect both Home Affairs employees and service seekers.

Transnational Crimes

Porous borders and weak enforcement have facilitated the rise of transnational crime. Syndicates involved in drug trafficking, human trafficking, and arms smuggling exploit South Africa's position as a regional hub

(Andreas, 2003). For example, the Department of Home Affairs has identified trafficking in small arms valued between \$1.7–\$3.5 billion annually, as well as organ trafficking valued between \$840 million–\$1.7 billion (UNODC, 2020). Transnational crimes of that magnitude are rarely isolated; they involve syndicates operating across multiple countries. These networks are highly adaptive, using informal routes, bribery, and corruption to bypass enforcement. Their sophistication overwhelms under-resourced agencies like the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Border Management Authority (BMA).

Corruption and Institutional Weaknesses

Corruption is a pervasive challenge in South Africa’s border management system. Officials at border posts and other enforcement offices have been accused of selling permits, facilitating irregular migration, or colluding with smugglers (Crush, 1997). This corruption undermines public trust and weakens enforcement capacity. Migrants often exploit corrupt networks to bypass regulations and enforcement, while criminal syndicates bribe officials to facilitate smuggling (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010; Department of Home Affairs, 2026). The 2026 Report of the Special Investigation Unit (SIU) documented systemic corruption at the Department of Home Affairs. The involvement of some employees including senior officials in corruption and permit fraud has led to investigations and dismissals, contributing to instability within the Department and demotivated other employees who otherwise wanted to perform to their best. Equally, due to the nature of the Department’s work, employees are sometimes targeted or pressured by external syndicates and politicians to facilitate fraudulent activities, creating a high-stress and unethical working environment.

Table 1: Corruption Cases in Border Governance (2019–2024)

Year	Total Disciplinary Cases in DHA	% Linked to Migrant Documentation Fraud	Average Bribe Range (Rand)
2019	420	15%	R1,500–R5,000
2020	460	17%	R2,000–R6,000
2021	500	18%	R2,500–R7,000
2022	540	20%	R2,500–R8,000
2023	580	21%	R3,000–R9,000
2024	620	22%	R2,000–R10,000

Sources: Department of Home Affairs (2026); Public Service Commission Report (2024); Miruka (2014); Dithebe & Mukhuba (2018)

Regional Instability and Refugee Flows

South Africa’s border challenges are compounded by regional and continental instability. Conflicts in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Ethiopia, CAR and others have generated large refugee flows into South Africa (Handmaker, 2009).

While South Africa is obligated under international treaties to provide protection to refugees, its enforcement capacity is limited and the absence of refugee camps in South Africa creates insecurity since refugees and asylum seekers are dispersed into urban areas without centralized monitoring, making regulation, service delivery, and security enforcement far more difficult. Criminal networks often exploit vulnerable migrants, while extremist groups may infiltrate refugee populations to evade detection (UNODC, 2020).

Furthermore, distinguishing between a genuine refugee and an economic migrant is a problem because the two groups often present similar circumstances, yet the legal and humanitarian obligations toward them are very different. South Africa’s asylum system struggles with this distinction, which creates administrative overload,

and often leads to social tensions. For instance, migrants from countries with no active conflicts like Malawi, Tanzania, Zimbabwe are issued with asylum seeker and refugee permits, blurring the line between genuine refugees and economic migrants. However, this distinction should not promote blanket rejections of these nationals because in many of Africa's repressive regimes, a person can be persecuted by government authorities, ruling parties, or powerful groups even in countries without civil wars. Under both South Africa's Refugees Act (1998) and the 1951 Geneva Convention, refugee protection is not limited to people from countries with active armed conflicts. The law recognizes that individuals may face persecution on grounds such as political opinion, religion, ethnicity, or membership of a social group, even in states that are otherwise considered 'peaceful'. Hence the Department of Home Affairs should in many instances resort to case-by-case assessment, ensuring that only those with credible persecution claims are granted refugee status. This protects the integrity of the asylum system while upholding South Africa's international obligations. It also helps reduce xenophobic tensions, since the public sees that refugee protection is reserved for those truly at risk, not for general economic migration.

Illegal Immigration And Deportation Trends, 1994–2026

South Africa's border management challenges are best understood through quantitative evidence that captures both the scale of undocumented immigration and the state's deportation practices. Estimates of undocumented immigrants in South Africa have risen steadily over the past three decades. In 1996, the population was estimated at approximately 1 million, increasing to 1.5 million in 2001 and 2.2 million in 2006 (Crush & Williams, 2018; Department of Home Affairs, 2026). By 2011, the figure had reached 2.7 million, before dipping slightly to 2.4 million in 2016, reflecting both methodological challenges in measurement and shifts in regional migration patterns (Segatti, 2011). More recent estimates suggest a resurgence, with 2.8 million in 2020 and projections of 3.1 million by 2025 (Statistics South Africa, 2011, 2022, 2025).

This upward trajectory highlights South Africa's dual role as both a destination and transit country within the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Scholars argue that the country's relative economic strength, combined with porous borders and weak enforcement mechanisms, has contributed to sustained undocumented migration (Landau, 2006; Vigneswaran, 2008). The persistence of high numbers despite periodic policy reforms suggests that enforcement alone has limited impact on long-term migration flows.

These statistical trends reveal the tension between enforcement capacity and regional mobility, underscoring the limits of securitized approaches to migration governance.

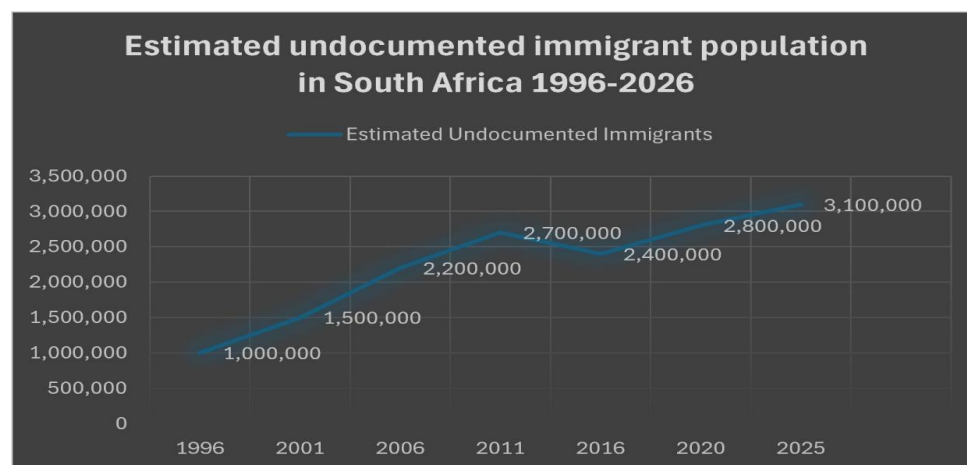


Figure 1. Estimated Undocumented Immigrant Population in South Africa (1996–2025)

Source: Author's compilation based on Statistics South Africa (1996, 2001, 2011, 2022, 2025) and Department of Home Affairs reports.

The figure illustrates the steady increase in South Africa's undocumented immigrant population from approximately one million in 1996 to over three million by 2025. The upward trajectory reflects sustained regional migration pressures, porous borders, and limited enforcement capacity. The data underscore the long-term structural nature of irregular migration, which persists despite periodic policy reforms and deportation

campaigns. Deportation statistics provide a quantitative measure of enforcement responses, though they also reveal the cyclical and reactive nature of South Africa's migration management.

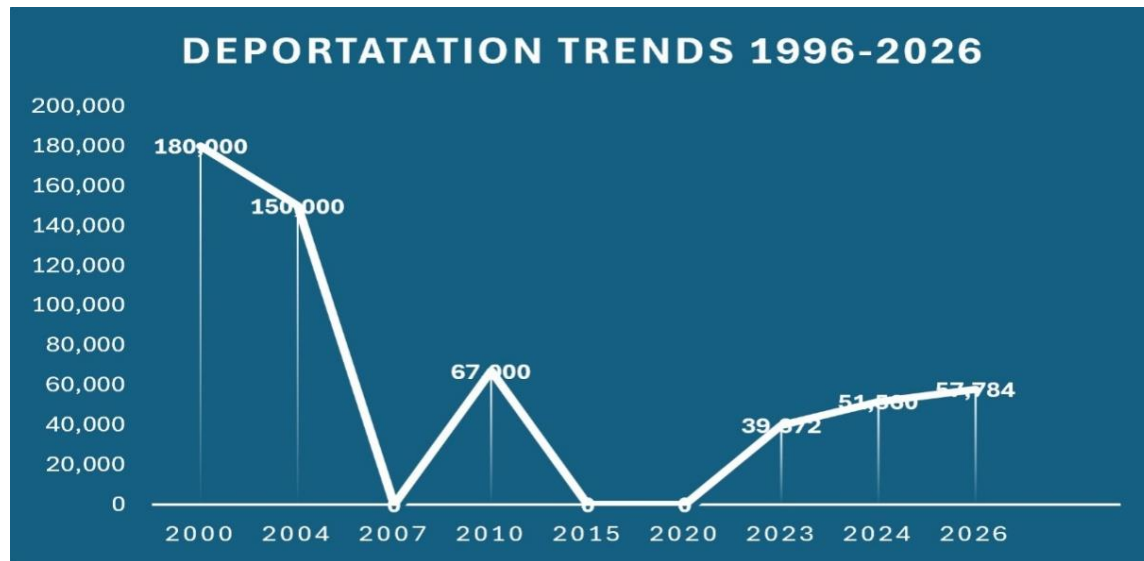


Figure 2. Deportation Trends in South Africa (2000–2026)

Source: Author's compilation using Department of Home Affairs annual deportation statistics (2000–2026).

This figure depicts the fluctuating pattern of deportations of undocumented migrants. Deportations peaked at over 300,000 in 2007, declined to an average of 67,000 per year between 2010 and 2019, dropped sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic (14,589 in 2020), and rose again to 57,784 in 2026. The cyclical nature of enforcement reflects political pressures, resource constraints, and the reactive character of South Africa's migration management.

The fluctuating deportation figures reflect the lack of a coherent, integrated strategy. High deportation numbers in the mid-2000s coincided with fragmented enforcement, while recent surges highlight the Border Management Authority's limited ability to coordinate agencies effectively and Government haste responses to public anxiety on the extent of illegal immigration in the country. Deportation surges also align with electoral cycles. The 2007 peak coincided with heightened political contestation, while the 2024–2026 increases reflect immigration's salience in the run-up to local elections. Parties such as ActionSA and the MK Party are exploiting public anxieties, framing deportations as evidence of decisive action. Quantitative trends therefore illustrate how enforcement is shaped by short-term political imperatives and less by a long-term strategy immigration policy or strategy.

Security Implications Of Ineffective Border Control

The relationship between border control and national security has become increasingly important in contemporary security studies. Traditionally, national security focused primarily on protecting states against military threats from external actors or hostile non-state armed groups. However, globalization, increased human mobility, transnational organized crime, terrorism, human trafficking, and illicit trade have broadened the understanding of security to include threats that transcend national boundaries and directly affect domestic stability. In South Africa, border control has emerged as a critical component of the country's national security architecture due to growing concerns about irregular migration, organized crime, trafficking networks, corruption, xenophobia and socio-economic pressures associated with porous borders. As Africa's most industrialized economy, South Africa attracts migrants, asylum seekers, traders, and investors from across the continent and beyond. While such mobility contributes to economic development and regional integration, it also creates challenges for immigration management and border security. Consequently, the effectiveness of border control has become closely linked to the country's ability to maintain domestic security and social stability. This section explores the major security implications of weak border management.

Conceptualizing Border Control and National Security

Border control refers to the policies, laws, institutions, and operational mechanisms used by a state to regulate the movement of people, goods, services, and vehicles across its territorial boundaries. These measures typically include immigration control, customs inspections, border surveillance, intelligence gathering, and law enforcement activities conducted at ports of entry and along borderlines (Andreas, 2003; Minnaar, 2001).

National security, on the other hand, encompasses the protection of a state's sovereignty, territorial integrity, political stability, economic prosperity, and the safety of its citizens. Contemporary approaches to national security recognize that internal threats may emerge from external vulnerabilities, particularly where border management systems are ineffective (Adamson, 2006; Kicing, 2004). From this perspective, border control serves as a critical first line of defence against both traditional and non-traditional threats. It is therefore without doubt that effective border management contributes to identifying, preventing, and mitigating risks before they manifest as domestic security challenges within a state's territory.

Border Control as a Component of South Africa's National Security System

The Open Systems Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between border control and national security. According to this theory, national security can be viewed as a system composed of multiple interconnected subsystems, each contributing to the overall functioning of the security environment (Rainey & Steinbauer, 2018). In the South African context, border control constitutes one such subsystem that works alongside institutions such as the South African Police Service (SAPS), South African National Defence Force (SANDF), Department of Home Affairs (DHA), South African Revenue Service (SARS), and the Border Management Authority (BMA).

The effectiveness of national security depends on the ability of these institutions to operate collaboratively. Where border management agencies fail to detect or prevent security threats from entering the country, domestic law enforcement agencies often bear the burden of addressing the consequences. Therefore, weaknesses in border security can have direct implications for internal security, public order, and governance.

Border Porosity and Transnational Organized Crime

One of the most important linkages between border control and domestic national security is the facilitation of transnational organized crime through porous borders.

Empirical data from the South African Police Service (SAPS) between 2020 and 2025 show a steady increase in arrests involving undocumented migrants in transnational crimes. As illustrated in *table 2*, the proportion of such arrests rose from 8% in 2020 to 18% in 2025, paralleling a surge in total transnational crime arrests from 50,000 to 85,000. This trend coincides with the escalation of small arms trafficking, valued between **\$1.7–\$3.5 billion annually**, and the growth of illegal migration from 2.8 million in 2018 to 4.2 million in 2025 (Statistics South Africa, 2022; Hoffman, 2025). The correlation between these indicators suggests that porous borders have become conduits for organized criminal networks, where criminal syndicates exploit weaknesses in border management systems to smuggle illegal goods, firearms, drugs, and trafficked persons into South Africa. These illicit activities contribute significantly to the country's crime burden and undermine public safety (Osimen et al., 2017). According to Ezeji (2024), porous borders facilitate the movement of illegal weapons that may subsequently be used in armed robberies, gang violence, heists, and other violent crimes within South African communities. Criminal networks operating across borders often establish relationships with local criminal groups, making their activities difficult to detect and prosecute once they have entered the country.

The Department of Home Affairs similarly identifies illicit trafficking activities, including small arms trafficking and organized criminal enterprises, as significant threats linked to weak border management systems. UNODC (2020) has documented South Africa's role as a transit hub for cocaine and heroin, with syndicates using porous borders to move narcotics into the country. These networks often overlap with gangs involved in violent crime, exacerbating insecurity in urban areas. Smuggling economies also undermine legitimate trade. Illegal imports of cigarettes, alcohol, and counterfeit goods deprive the state of revenue, destabilize markets, and strengthen criminal syndicates (Peberdy, 2001). The link between irregular migration and crime is complex, but evidence

suggests that weak border enforcement facilitates criminal activity, undermining public safety (Dodson, 2010). These activities not only undermine domestic security but also threaten economic stability and public confidence in state institutions.

Table 2: Crime and Migration Statistics (2020–2025).

Year	Total Transnational Crime Arrests	% Involving Undocumented Migrants	Estimated Illegal Immigrants (Millions)	Small Arms Trafficking Value (USD Billions)
2020	50,000	8%	2.8	1.8
2021	55,000	10%	3.0	2.0
2022	62,000	12%	3.4	2.4
2023	70,000	14%	3.7	2.7
2024	78,000	16%	4.0	3.0
2025	85,000	18%	4.2	3.3

Sources: SAPS Crime Statistics (2025); UNODC (2020); Statistics South Africa (2022); Hoffman (2025).

Xenophobia and Social Tensions

The relationship between border control and national security extends beyond crime and terrorism to include socio-economic dimensions. South Africa faces significant challenges relating to unemployment, poverty, inequality, and service delivery. In such circumstances, large-scale irregular migration may place additional pressure on housing, healthcare, education, and labour markets, particularly in disadvantaged communities (Landau & Segatti, 2009; Ditsebe & Mukhuba, 2018; Mbiyozo, 2026).

Whether real or perceived, competition over scarce resources has contributed to social tensions between local communities and migrants. Such tensions have periodically manifested in xenophobic violence and public unrest in different parts of South Africa (Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh & Singh, 2005; Campbell, 2003), particularly in urban areas where migrants compete with locals for jobs, businesses and services.

Table 3 depicts xenophobic attacks recorded between 2019 and 2023, rising from 220 incidents in 2019 to 370 in 2023, with a cumulative total of 1,200 incidents nationwide. These outbreaks are concentrated in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, provinces with high migrant density and unemployment. Surveys reveal that 62% of South Africans believe migrants “take jobs away”, a perception that fuels resentment and violence (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010; Khumalo, 2026). This trend demonstrates that xenophobia is not only a social problem but also a security issue. Violence against migrants destabilizes communities, undermines social cohesion, and erodes trust in government institutions. The 2026 anti-immigration activities by organizations such as March and March and Operation Dudula highlight the severity of this issue. Reports document raids on businesses, forced evictions, and killings of migrants, displacing thousands into precarious conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Such coercive tactics mirror rebellion whereby violence substitutes for lawful governance. Furthermore, over 120 protests nationwide disrupted communities, with employers dismissing foreign workers and landlords evicting tenants under activist pressure. This created a parallel enforcement regime, destabilizing local economies and eroding trust in government protection (Amnesty International, 2026). Moreover, the government has also struggled to address immigration and xenophobia effectively. While policies emphasize inclusivity and human rights, enforcement remained weak and were intensified only after escalation in protests. This dynamic illustrates the complex interplay between border control, migration, and social stability.

Table 3: Xenophobic Incidents in South Africa (2019–2026).

Year	Number of Incidents	Key notes
2019	220	Targeted Nigerian nationals; sporadic urban violence.
2020	150	Decline due to COVID-19 restrictions
2021	180	Rise of vigilante groups like Operation Dudula.
2022	280	Attacks concentrated in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal
2023	370	Sharp escalation; widespread looting of migrant shops.
2024	120	Sporadic attacks, mostly in informal settlements.
2025	180	Court injunction against Operation Dudula, but violence persisted.
2026	350	New vigilante group March and March escalated violence; Mossel Bay and Johannesburg deaths reported.

Sources: Human Sciences Research Council (2024); Department of Home Affairs (2026); Khumalo (2026); UN Human Rights Committee Reports (2026).

Human Trafficking, Migrant Smuggling and Border Security

Human trafficking and migrant smuggling constitute another critical nexus between border control and national security. According to UNODC (2020), South Africa accounts for **30% of regional human trafficking cases**, with organ trafficking valued between **\$840 million–\$1.7 billion annually**. Between 2020 and 2025, SAPS recorded a **19% increase in trafficking cases involving foreign nationals**, underscoring how undocumented migrants are disproportionately vulnerable to exploitation. These figures highlight the intersection between irregular migration and organized crime, where human vulnerability becomes a commodity in illicit markets (Andreas, 2003; Dodson, 2010; Department of Home Affairs, 2026). South Africa serves as both a destination and transit country for human trafficking networks operating across the African continent. Traffickers exploit porous borders to transport vulnerable individuals for purposes of labour exploitation, forced labour, and other forms of abuse (Osimen et al., 2017). Weak border controls provide opportunities for smugglers and traffickers to move undocumented migrants through clandestine routes, thereby circumventing immigration controls. Such activities undermine the state's ability to regulate human mobility while simultaneously exposing migrants to abuse and exploitation. Effective border management therefore contributes not only to national security but also to the protection of human rights and human security.

Table 4: Human Trafficking Indicators (2020–2025)

Year	Recorded Trafficking Cases	% Involving Foreign Nationals	Estimated Organ Trafficking Value (USD Billions)
2020	1,200	25%	0.84
2021	1,350	26%	1.0
2022	1,500	27%	1.2
2023	1,650	28%	1.4
2024	1,800	29%	1.6
2025	1,950	30%	1.7

Sources: UNODC (2020); SAPS Trafficking Reports (2025).

Border Security and the Threat of Terrorism

Although Southern Africa has experienced relatively limited terrorist activity compared to other regions, the possibility of violent extremist actors exploiting porous borders remains a security concern. Global experiences have demonstrated that terrorist organizations often rely on weaknesses in border management systems to facilitate movement, acquire resources, and establish support networks (Weiner, 1992; Adamson, 2006). For example, the presence of transnational crime syndicates provides cover for extremist groups, who may exploit smuggling routes to move personnel and resources. Refugee flows from conflict zones also create risks, as extremist groups and members of rebel movements may infiltrate vulnerable populations to evade detection (UNODC, 2020). The 2013, 2015 and 2015 terrorist attacks in Kenya by Al-Shabab linked groups operating within refugee communities are pertinent examples.

Effective border control enhances national security by enabling authorities to screen travelers, verify identities, collect intelligence, and identify individuals who may pose security risks. Border security therefore forms an important component of broader counterterrorism and preventative security strategies.

Economic Instability

Irregular migration places significant strain on South Africa's economy. Migrants often compete with locals for jobs, housing, and services, creating tensions and fueling unemployment (Peberdy, 2001). Public services such as healthcare and education are also burdened, as irregular migrants often lack documentation but still require support (Dodson, 2010).

Smuggling economies further undermines economic stability. Illegal imports deprive the state of revenue, while counterfeit goods destabilize markets and weaken consumer confidence (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010). The economic implications of weak border management are therefore twofold: irregular migration strains public services, while smuggling undermines revenue and market stability. Together, these dynamics weaken the state's capacity to provide for its citizens, eroding legitimacy and stability.

Erosion of State Legitimacy

Weak border management undermines the legitimacy of the state. Citizens expect the government to protect sovereignty and ensure security. When borders are porous and enforcement is ineffective, public trust erodes (Handmaker, 2009). Xenophobic violence illustrates this erosion of legitimacy. Communities often perceive the government as failing to regulate migration, leading to frustration and hostility. This frustration is directed not only at migrants but also at state institutions, weakening governance and stability. On number of occasions, groups such as Operation Dudula and March and March have taken immigration enforcement into their own hands; thus, usurped state authority. Whereas perpetrators of xenophobic violence are rarely prosecuted, actions of these groups highlight how non-state actors challenge state sovereignty and undermine its legitimacy. More so, they point to South Africa's State inability to hold the monopoly to control the means and use of violence, which mirrors state fragility. The 2021 and 2026 anti-immigration marches and socio-political precedents they sent are the hallmark of this fragility. While framed as community activism, these mobilizations amount to internal rebellion and insurrectionary movements because they bypass state authority, enforce extrajudicial ultimatums, and destabilize national security through violence and displacement (Von Holdt, 2022) where the latter substitutes for lawful governance. The erosion of lawful governance is a hallmark of rebellion, which in turn undermines the legitimacy of a state.

The waning of state legitimacy is also tied to corruption that comes with illegal immigration. When officials exploit migrants' vulnerability or collude with smugglers, citizens lose faith in the integrity of institutions. This erosion of trust weakens the state's capacity to govern effectively, creating a cycle of insecurity and instability (Crush, 1997). Investigations by the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) revealed that Home Affairs officials sold permits and visas to unqualified individuals, often in collusion with foreign syndicates. External actors, including high-profile figures like Prophet Shepherd Bushiri, manipulated systemic weaknesses to secure fraudulent residence permits. The Waterkloof landing of the Gupta family in 2013 is another episode that can be understood as a form of illegal immigration (Public Protector, 2014) that eroded state legitimacy since it bypassed immigration and customs procedures by fraudulently claiming diplomatic privilege through connections with

corrupt officials. The incident revealed how Home Affairs, Defence, and Foreign Affairs officials colluded to override immigration law. These actions effectively auctioned off South Africa's borders, eroding state sovereignty, deepening perceptions of corruption and signaling that state institutions could be hijacked for private gain (State Capture Commission, 2022), and ultimately undermining confidence in governance (Chipkin & Swilling, 2018).

Regional Security Risks

South Africa's border challenges carry significant regional security implications. Porous borders not only enable the movement of irregular migrants but also facilitate the operations of transnational criminal networks across Southern Africa, thereby destabilizing neighboring states (Dithebe & Mukhuba, 2018). In this context, illegal immigration in Southern Africa is not merely a domestic issue for South Africa; rather, it functions as a regional destabilizer with far-reaching economic, political, and social consequences for surrounding countries.

When South Africa fails to regulate migration effectively, neighboring states perceive it as a source of instability, weakening trust and confidence in collective security arrangements (Malatji, 2023). Weak enforcement has been linked to arms smuggling syndicates, which exploit porous borders to operate across multiple states. South Africa has increasingly become a hub for illicit trafficking, with small arms routed through its territory linked to conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and insurgencies in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province (UNODC, 2020; UNODC, 2021). These dynamics illustrate how lapses in migration regulation intersect with organized crime, amplifying insecurity and undermining regional stability.

Furthermore, recent waves of violence and xenophobic attacks and subsequent mass deportations and voluntary repatriations have created ripple effects across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) as well as within the AU, undermining regional cooperation and exposing governance gaps. Countries such as Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, Ghana and Nigeria have condemned Pretoria's failure to protect foreign nationals, with some organizing mass repatriations of their nationals. While these actions reflect a loss of confidence in South Africa's ability to uphold regional obligations, they also weaken SADC and AU solidarity and erode trust in collective security frameworks in place. However, they also point to selfish interests and policy hypocrisy of individual states concerned because they themselves maintain strict immigration controls domestically. Malawi provides a vivid example of this contradiction. Across major highways and border routes, the Malawian police operate frequent roadblocks that serve as mobile enforcement points, extending border control deep into the interior of the country. They are particularly designed to deter irregular migration from Tanzania and Mozambique. Despite being a member of ECOWAS, which promotes free movement of goods and people, Nigeria has also on several occasions, deported undocumented migrants from neighboring states such as Niger, Benin, and Ghana. In 2019, for example, Nigerian authorities expelled thousands of irregular migrants, citing national security concerns and economic pressures (Adepoju, 2020; IOM, 2022). These actions demonstrate that Nigeria prioritizes sovereignty and domestic stability over regional integration, even while criticizing South Africa's enforcement against Nigerian nationals. Equally, the enforcement of the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre Act, which restricts retail trade to Ghanaian citizens, has led to repeated crackdowns on foreign traders operating in Accra and Kumasi. Immigration officials have closed shops, arrested traders, and deported those without proper documentation. These measures have sparked diplomatic tensions between Ghana and Nigeria (IOM, 2022), yet Ghana has simultaneously condemned South Africa's deportations of Ghanaian nationals. These contradictions point to political hypocrisy whereby enforcement is normalized at home but politicized when South Africa applies similar measures for many reasons. Many of these states struggle in their own backyards with unemployment, poverty, corruption, bad governance, politics of exclusion among other things and by condemning South Africa's enforcement, they avoid confronting their own structural failures and effectively shift the burden onto South Africa's institutions. More so, many of these countries rely heavily on remittances from migrants in South Africa and a stronger immigration enforcement threatens these financial lifelines. Therefore, condemnation is often motivated by protecting remittance flows rather than addressing the root causes of migration. By criticizing Pretoria, they divert attention from their own inability to create decent life for their citizens, externalizing blame for social, political or economic instability at home.

Socio-Economic Impacts of Ineffective Border Control

Porous borders and irregular migration intensify pressures across employment, public services, informal economies, and community relations. The economic dimension of illegal immigration is reflected in labor market data.

Table 5: Migrant Labor in the Informal Economy (2018–2026)

Year	Construction (%)	Domestic Work (%)	Street Vending (%)	Agriculture (%)	Hospitality (%)	Transport (Taxis/Delivery) (%)
2018	25	24	20	15	12	10
2019	26	25	21	16	13	11
2020	27	25	21	16	13	12
2021	28	26	22	17	14	13
2022	29	27	22	18	15	14
2023	30	28	23	19	16	15
2024	30	28	23	19	16	15
2025	31	29	24	20	17	16
2026	32	30	25	21	18	17

Sources: Statistics South Africa (2022); Centre for Development and Enterprise (2025); Peberdy (2001); Mbiyozo (2026).

The Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2025) places unemployment at **32.9%**, while research by the Centre for Development and Enterprise indicates that undocumented migrants constitute **25% of the informal urban labor market**. As shown in *table 5*, migrant participation in informal employment grew by **21% between 2018 and 2024**, particularly in construction (30%), domestic work (28%), and street vending (23%) (Peberdy, 2001; Mbiyozo, 2026). This expansion has intensified perceptions of job displacement, feeding populist narratives that link migration to economic decline. Yet, paradoxically, the informal sector's reliance on migrant labor also sustains urban economies, revealing a complex duality between economic necessity and social tension. The case of South Africa farm workers in which majority are undocumented Malawians and Zimbabweans credits these concerns.

The expansion has also put pressure on public services such as healthcare, education, and housing are strained by undocumented migrants (Okunade, 2025; Springer Nature, 2025), creating resource shortages and administrative burdens that heighten community tensions. This so because illegal immigration complicates government planning for basic services because it introduces unpredictable demand that is not accounted for in official population statistics or budget allocations. Governments typically plan healthcare, education, housing, and infrastructure based on census data and registered residents. When large numbers of undocumented migrants settle in a country, the state faces several challenges that affect aspects of human security. This not only weakens socio-economic planning but also erodes state legitimacy when citizens perceive the government as unable to manage resources fairly. At the community level, competition for scarce resources and cultural differences exacerbate hostility, leading to xenophobic attacks that destabilize social cohesion and erode trust in government institutions. Collectively, these dynamics illustrate that ineffective border control is not merely a security issue but a driver of socio-economic instability, weakening both community relations and state legitimacy.

Comparative Perspectives

South Africa's border management challenges are not unique. Many states across Africa and the World grapple with porous borders, irregular migration, and transnational crime. Comparative analysis provides valuable insights into how different countries have addressed these challenges, offering lessons that South Africa can adapt

to its own context. This section examines experiences from other African states — notably Kenya, Nigeria, Botswana, Rwanda — and global best practices such as the European Union's Schengen system and the United States' Homeland Security framework.

African Experiences

Kenya: Security Imperatives, Refugee Camps, and Terrorist Exploitation

Kenya's border management challenges are shaped by its proximity to Somalia, a state plagued by instability and terrorism. The infiltration of Al-Shabaab militants has compelled Kenya to adopt a securitized approach, including military deployment along borders, construction of physical barriers, and enhanced surveillance.

Porous borders and large refugee camps such as Dadaab (Adewunmi, 2021; UNHCR, 2023) have been systematically exploited by terrorists:

- **Porous Borders:** Kenya's northeastern frontier with Somalia remains difficult to police. Armed groups and smugglers cross with relative ease, bypassing overstretched border posts (Anderson & McKnight, 2015).
- **Refugee Camps:** Dadaab has been infiltrated by Al-Shabaab operatives who use the camp to recruit, radicalize, and smuggle weapons. Kenyan authorities have uncovered caches of grenades, explosives, and ammunition linked to planned attacks in Nairobi.
- **Urban Attacks:** Nairobi has suffered devastating incidents, most notably the Westgate Mall attack in 2013, where Al-Shabaab militants killed at least 67 people and injured over 175 (National Counter Terrorism Centre, 2014). More recently, Kenyan security forces foiled plots linked to Dadaab, recovering explosives and hundreds of rounds of ammunition intended for attacks in the capital.

Kenya's experience underscores the dual challenge of securing borders while managing refugee populations humanely. For South Africa, the lesson is clear: weak border enforcement and poorly monitored refugee systems can be exploited by transnational extremist groups, making integration of border security and urban intelligence essential.

Nigeria: Domestic Enforcement and Border Governance

Nigeria's borders are among the most porous in Africa, facilitating smuggling, trafficking, and insurgency. Weak enforcement capacity, corruption, and resource constraints have allowed extremist groups such as Boko Haram (Akinyemi, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2020) to exploit border regions. Domestically, Nigeria has pursued several enforcement strategies:

- **Fragmented Institutional Framework:** Enforcement is divided among the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), the Police, and the military. This fragmentation often leads to duplication of roles and poor coordination.
- **Corruption and Patronage Networks:** Smuggling networks frequently rely on bribery to bypass checkpoints, while political patronage undermines accountability (Onuoha, 2013).
- **Militarization of Border Regions:** Nigeria has deployed military forces to border areas, particularly in the northeast. While this provides short-term deterrence, it has not addressed structural weaknesses and sometimes alienates local communities.
- **Community-Level Enforcement:** Attempts to involve local communities in reporting suspicious activities have been limited by weak trust in government institutions and fear of reprisals from insurgents.
- **Regional Cooperation as a Supplement:** Nigeria participates in the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), coordinating operations with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Yet domestic enforcement remains the weakest link; without strong internal capacity, regional cooperation cannot fully compensate.

For South Africa, Nigeria's experience underscores the importance of institutional coherence, anti-corruption measures, balanced enforcement, and building trust with communities to ensure effective grassroots vigilance.

Botswana: Governance, Political Will, and Zimbabwean Migration

Botswana presents a contrasting success story in border management, but its challenges are closely tied to migration pressures from Zimbabwe (Crush & Tevera, 2017). Economic instability and political crises in Zimbabwe have historically driven large numbers of migrants into Botswana, seeking employment, safety, and better living conditions.

Botswana's response illustrates both strengths and limitations:

- **Strict Immigration Controls:** Zimbabwean nationals often enter legally but overstay permits, leading to irregular status. Botswana enforces visa and work permit requirements rigorously and frequently resorts to deportations of undocumented Zimbabweans.
- **Border Patrols:** The Botswana Defence Force (BDF) and immigration officials conduct regular patrols along the border to deter irregular crossings.
- **Labour Market Pressures:** Zimbabwean migrants fill labour gaps in agriculture, construction, and domestic service. While economically useful, their presence has sometimes been perceived as competition for jobs, fueling restrictive policies.
- **Public Sentiment:** Botswana's relatively small population and strong national identity have shaped cautious attitudes toward large-scale migration. Public pressure has influenced government policies to remain firm on enforcement.
- **Cross-Border Trade:** Despite restrictions, Zimbabweans contribute significantly to informal trade networks, sustaining livelihoods across the border. Botswana has tolerated some of this activity, recognizing its economic importance.
- **Governance and Enforcement:** Strong institutional coherence between the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the police, and the BDF ensures consistent enforcement. Migrants found without documentation are often detained and repatriated, a practice criticized by human rights groups but defended by Botswana as necessary for sovereignty and order.

While these measures have contributed to effective border enforcement, critics argue that deportation-focused approaches do not address the root causes of migration (Migration Policy Institute, 2021).

For South Africa, Botswana's handling of Zimbabwean migration demonstrates the importance of governance discipline and institutional coherence but also warns of the risks of over-reliance on deportations without addressing root causes of migration.

Rwanda: Innovation, Discipline, Community-Based Surveillance, and Open Visa Policy

Rwanda has adopted a governance-driven approach to border management, emphasizing institutional discipline, technology, and regional cooperation. Its small size and centralized governance have enabled tighter control over borders, reducing smuggling and irregular migration. Rwanda's emphasis on digital systems, biometric controls, and electronic databases offers a model of innovation that South Africa could adapt, particularly in enhancing efficiency and transparency (Government of Rwanda, 2022; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022).

A distinctive feature of Rwanda's system is the use of local government agents to monitor and report foreign

nationals or other unfamiliar faces within their respective jurisdictions. At the *cell* and *sector* levels, community leaders are tasked with maintaining records of residents, including foreigners, and reporting their presence to higher authorities. This decentralized vigilance ensures that irregular migration is detected not only at border posts but also within communities (Goodfellow, 2014; Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Local Government, 2021).

Equally significant is Rwanda's open visa policy, which allows citizens from nearly all countries to obtain visas on arrival. President Paul Kagame reaffirmed Rwanda's visa-free and open border policy for all Africans, presenting it as both an economic and political opportunity and commitment to continental unity; emphasizing that Africans should not be strangers to one another on their own continent (Kagame, 2026). This liberal regime has:

- **Boosted Tourism and Investment:** Easier entry has increased visitor numbers, supported Rwanda's growing tourism sector and attracted foreign investors (African Development Bank, 2023; World Bank, 2023).
- **Enhanced Diplomatic Soft Power:** By championing free movement, Rwanda positions itself as a progressive, outward-looking state, strengthening its influence in AU and global forums.
- **Supported Conference Tourism:** Kigali has become a hub for international conferences, facilitated by ease of entry for delegates worldwide.
- **Aligned with Regional Integration Goals:** The policy reflects AU and EAC objectives of free movement, reinforcing Rwanda's role as a driver of continental unity.

Importantly, Rwanda balances openness with vigilance: biometric registration, integration with immigration databases, and community-level reporting ensure that foreigners are traceable and accountable (IOM, 2022; Rwanda Directorate General of Immigration and Emigration, 2023). This dual approach — openness at entry and monitoring within communities or vigilance inside the country — allows Rwanda to reap economic and diplomatic benefits while maintaining security and demonstrates how economic integration and national security can coexist (Akinola & Chigbu, 2022).

For South Africa, Rwanda's model demonstrates that liberal visa regimes can coexist with strong internal monitoring, offering both economic leverage and security assurance.

Global Best Practices

European Union: The Schengen System

The Schengen system represents one of the most advanced models of border management. It allows free movement within member states but relies on strict external border controls, biometric systems, and intelligence sharing (European Commission, 2023). The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) coordinates enforcement, providing resources and expertise to member states (Guild, 2017).

The system highlights the importance of regional collaboration: pooling resources and harmonizing policies strengthens external border management while facilitating internal mobility. For South Africa, this underscores the need for regional cooperation through the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU). A regional framework could help harmonize migration policies, share intelligence, and coordinate enforcement, thereby reducing the burden on South Africa's borders.

United States: Homeland Security Framework and Admission of People of Valuable Interests

The United States has developed a comprehensive border management system, particularly along the Mexican border, combining physical barriers, surveillance technology, biometric systems, and centralized coordination under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (Department of Homeland Security, 2023). This model emphasizes integration and technological innovation but has raised concerns about militarization and human

rights.

Beyond enforcement, the U.S. also admits individuals of valuable interests in its special visa pathways— those whose presence serves national, economic, or humanitarian objectives (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2023):

- **National Security Value:** Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) programs admit interpreters and informants from conflict zones who provide intelligence support.
- **Economic Value:** Skilled professionals, entrepreneurs, and investors are admitted under H-1B, EB-5, and O-1 visas, contributing to innovation and capital inflows.
- **Humanitarian Value:** Refugees and asylum seekers are admitted through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), aligning humanitarian commitments with foreign policy interests.
- **Diplomatic Value:** Scholars, dissidents, and cultural figures are admitted, strengthening U.S. soft power and signal support for democracy and human rights.

Strict vetting — including biometric checks, background investigations, and intelligence coordination — ensures that openness is balanced with security.

For South Africa, the U.S. framework illustrates the importance of institutional integration and advanced technology, while the “valuable interest” principle demonstrates how migration policy can be leveraged strategically to attract skills, investment, and diplomatic capital

.Comparative Analysis

The comparative review of African and global experiences highlights several strategic lessons for South Africa’s border management:

- **Centralized Coordination and Institutional Integration:** The Schengen system and the U.S. Homeland Security framework demonstrate the importance of consolidating border functions under a unified authority. Effective coordination reduces duplication, enhances accountability, and ensures coherence across enforcement agencies. South Africa’s Border Management Authority (BMA) could assume this role if adequately resourced and empowered.
- **Regional Collaboration and Collective Security:** Nigeria’s reliance on the Multinational Joint Task Force illustrates the necessity of regional partnerships in addressing transnational threats. For South Africa, strengthening cooperation within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU) is essential to harmonize migration policies, share intelligence, and coordinate enforcement. A regional framework would reduce unilateral burdens and enhance collective resilience.
- **Technological Innovation and Modernization of Enforcement Capacity:** Rwanda’s biometric systems, Botswana’s surveillance practices, and the U.S. investment in advanced technologies underscore the importance of modern tools in border governance. South Africa must prioritize digital integration, biometric registration, and data-driven surveillance to address increasingly complex threats such as trafficking, terrorism, and irregular migration.
- **Community-Based Monitoring and Grassroots Vigilance:** Rwanda’s distinctive use of local government agents to monitor and report the presence of foreign nationals offers a valuable model. By embedding migration oversight within communities, Rwanda ensures that irregular migration is detected not only at border posts but also within local jurisdictions. South Africa could emulate this by empowering municipalities and community policing forums to maintain accurate records, report suspicious activities, and feed information into national immigration databases. Such a system would extend vigilance beyond physical borders, strengthen early detection of irregular migration, and foster community ownership of

border governance — provided safeguards are in place to prevent discrimination or harassment of migrants.

- **Strategic Admissions and National Interests:** The U.S. model demonstrates how migration policy can be leveraged to serve broader national objectives. By admitting individuals of “valuable interest” — whether for national security, economic innovation, humanitarian commitments, or diplomatic soft power — the U.S. aligns border management with strategic priorities. South Africa could adopt a similar principle, selectively admitting skilled professionals, investors, and cultural figures whose presence strengthens national development, regional leadership, and international influence. This approach would transform migration from a perceived burden into a strategic asset.
- **Governance and Innovation over Militarization:** Botswana and Rwanda demonstrate that disciplined governance, institutional coherence, and technological innovation yield more sustainable outcomes than militarization. Furthermore, Botswana’s strong institutional coordination and Rwanda’s innovative use of biometrics, digital systems, and community-based monitoring show how effective governance can secure borders while maintaining legitimacy. In contrast, Kenya and Nigeria’s reliance on military deployment has provided short-term deterrence but often alienated communities, fostered mistrust, and failed to address structural weaknesses. For South Africa, the lesson is clear: prioritize governance reforms, institutional discipline, and innovation rather than defaulting to militarized responses.
- **Balancing Security with Humanitarian Obligations** Kenya’s securitized approach reveals the risks of excessive militarization and exclusionary practices, particularly in relation to refugee populations. South Africa must avoid replicating these pitfalls by ensuring that enforcement measures respect human rights and uphold international refugee protections, while still safeguarding sovereignty.

Opportunities For Improvement

The persistent challenges of porous borders, fragmented institutional coordination, and politicized immigration policies underscore the urgent need for reform in South Africa’s border control and management system. Opportunities for improvement lie in strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing technological innovation, fostering regional cooperation, and depoliticizing immigration discourse. Several key opportunities stand out.

Institutional Integration and Capacity Building

The consolidation of overlapping mandates among agencies such as the DHA, SANDF, SAPS, SARS, and the BMA is essential. A unified command structure under the BMA, supported by adequate funding, specialized training, and anti-corruption safeguards, would enhance operational coherence. Strengthening human capacity in document verification, intelligence analysis, and border crime prevention is critical to restoring credibility and effectiveness.

Mapping and Categorization of Undocumented Foreign Nationals

A decisive step toward improving border governance is the comprehensive mapping of all undocumented foreign nationals residing in South Africa. This process would establish accurate data on the scale and distribution of irregular migration, enabling evidence-based policy responses. Once mapped, authorities should implement a structured system to determine who qualifies for legal stay—based on humanitarian grounds, skills, or economic contribution—and who should be subject to deportation in line with national security and immigration laws. Such an approach balances humanitarian obligations with sovereignty, while reducing the strain on public services and curbing opportunities for criminal exploitation. It also provides a transparent framework that can mitigate xenophobic tensions by ensuring that decisions are based on clear, fair, reasonable and legal criteria rather than populist rhetoric advanced by extremist activists and politicians seeking electoral support.

Technological Innovation and Surveillance

Modernizing border infrastructure through advanced surveillance technologies offers a pathway to improved enforcement. Biometric systems, drones, satellite monitoring, and integrated data platforms can strengthen

detection of irregular crossings and fraudulent documentation. Digital interoperability among agencies would allow real-time information sharing, reducing gaps exploited by smugglers and traffickers. Technology-driven solutions must be accompanied by safeguards to protect human rights and prevent misuse and abuse.

Regional and International Cooperation

South Africa cannot secure its borders in isolation. Strengthening collaboration within SADC and the African Union is essential to address transnational crime and irregular migration flows. Joint patrols, intelligence-sharing agreements, and harmonized visa regimes would reduce enforcement asymmetries between states. Regional cooperation should also extend to socioeconomic development initiatives, recognizing that poverty and instability in neighboring countries drive irregular migration. By promoting collective security, South Africa can balance sovereignty with humanitarian obligations.

The Role of African Countries in Addressing Illegal Immigration into South Africa

Illegal immigration into South Africa is not solely a domestic challenge but a regional African issue that requires collective responsibility. While South Africa bears the brunt of irregular migration due to its economic strength and liberalized policies, neighboring states and continental partners must acknowledge their own role in this dynamic. It is counterproductive for African governments to condemn South Africa's enforcement measures, including citizens' frustration on the magnitude and effects of illegal immigration while failing to address the structural drivers of migration within their own borders. Instead of criticism, African countries should shoulder the burden of responsibility for their citizens who reside illegally in South Africa. Given the interconnected nature of migration, security, and development across the continent, African countries have a critical role to play in addressing the root causes and facilitating effective migration management in South Africa and across the continent. This entails:

- **Accepting Accountability:** Governments must recognize that irregular migration often stems from poverty, unemployment, corruption, and weak governance at home. Condemnation of South Africa's enforcement deflects responsibility rather than solving the problem (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014).
- **Supporting Enforcement and Repatriation Efforts:** Rather than opposing deportations or stricter controls, countries of origin should cooperate with South Africa in verifying the identities of undocumented migrants, facilitating repatriation including financial support to travel costs, and assisting reintegration programmes (Department of Home Affairs, 2026). For instance, between May and August 2026, the Department of Home Affairs spent more than R341 million on the repatriation of foreign nationals, particularly from Malawi and Zimbabwe. Much of this expenditure was allocated to transport, with buses alone costing R233 million. Additional funds were directed towards temporary facilities in Musina (R48 million), municipal reimbursements, and overtime for officials. In total, approximately 90,000 individuals were repatriated during this period, underscoring both the humanitarian scale and fiscal burden of South Africa's migration management system (GroundUp, 2026; Parliament of South Africa, 2026).
- **Strengthening Domestic Governance:** By promoting economic development, job creation, and political stability, origin countries can reduce the push factors driving irregular migration (Mbiyozo, 2026).
- **Regional Solidarity:** Through SADC and the African Union, states should collaborate on harmonized migration policies, intelligence-sharing, and joint border patrols. (Handmaker, 2009; Department of Home Affairs, 2026).
- **Addressing Root Causes of Migration:** Governments must promote economic development, strengthen democratic governance, improve access to education and healthcare, and tackle corruption and inequality to reduce outward migration pressures.
- **Strengthening Border Security and Management:** African states should upgrade border infrastructure, conduct joint patrols, enhance information-sharing, and implement biometric identification systems to reduce unauthorized movements of their citizens.

- **Enhancing Regional Cooperation through SADC and AU:** Regional organizations should coordinate migration policies, harmonize immigration procedures, and facilitate intelligence-sharing to disrupt transnational criminal networks that smuggle migrants to South Africa. This collective approach ensures that South Africa is not left isolated to manage the continent's migration pressures.
- **Combating Human Trafficking and Smuggling Networks:** Joint investigations, prosecutions, and intelligence-sharing can dismantle syndicates exploiting weak borders to smuggle migrants to South Africa.
- **Facilitating Legal Migration Channels:** Bilateral labour agreements, temporary work permits, and regional mobility frameworks can provide safe alternatives to irregular migration; thus, discouraging illegal migration.
- **Supporting Public Awareness and Migration Education:** Governments must educate citizens on the risks of illegal migration, trafficking, and available legal pathways.

A coordinated continental approach involving South Africa, neighboring and countries with high number of immigrants in South Africa like Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroun, Ethiopia and regional bodies including SADC, and the AU is essential for achieving sustainable migration management while preserving regional security, economic development, and human rights

Policy Reform and Depoliticization of Immigration

Depoliticizing immigration discourse is vital to coherent policy development. Populist rhetoric has often overshadowed evidence-based solutions, leading to short-term crackdowns and hasted deportations rather than sustainable reforms. As part of national security strategy, policy reforms should tighten enforcement of stay limits, strengthen monitoring of undocumented migrants, and align domestic laws with international obligations. Public education campaigns can counter xenophobia by highlighting migrants' contributions to the economy and society, while ensuring that enforcement measures remain consistent and fair.

Socioeconomic and Community-Based Approaches

Border management must also integrate socioeconomic strategies that address root causes of instability. Community engagement in border regions can foster cooperation between local populations and enforcement agencies, reducing reliance on informal crossings. Expanding economic opportunities and service delivery in border communities would diminish incentives for illicit trade and irregular migration. A holistic approach that combines security with development is more likely to yield sustainable outcomes.

In short, opportunities for improvement in South Africa's border management lie in institutional strengthening, technological modernization, regional collaboration, policy coherence, and community-based development. Crucially, the mapping and categorization of undocumented foreign nationals, combined with the active role of African countries in addressing illegal immigration, provides a foundation for rational decision-making on regularization or deportation. By pursuing these avenues, South Africa can transform border control into a proactive instrument of sovereignty, national security, and socioeconomic stability, while fostering regional solidarity and shared responsibility.

CONCLUSION

Border management in South Africa stands at the intersection of sovereignty, security, and humanitarian responsibility. The country's porous borders, fragmented institutional frameworks, and politicized immigration policies have created vulnerabilities that criminal networks, irregular migrants, and extremist groups exploit. While the establishment of the Border Management Authority (BMA) was intended to centralize enforcement, weak coordination, corruption, and resource deficits continue to undermine its effectiveness.

The analysis demonstrates that border control is not merely a technical exercise of regulating entry and exit but a strategic imperative for safeguarding national security, protecting citizens, and ensuring socioeconomic

stability. Theoretical perspectives — open systems theory, realism, and liberalism — highlight the need for a balanced approach that integrates enforcement, cooperation, and humanitarian obligations. Without decisive reforms, South Africa risks further instability, xenophobic violence, and erosion of state legitimacy.

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