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## African Union and the Quest for Socio-Economic Emancipation in the Face of Xenophobia

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**Abstract**

Xenophobia presents a significant obstacle to the African Union's (AU) vision of a united and integrated continent. Xenophobia in Africa refers to negative feelings and discriminatory behaviour towards outsiders, particularly immigrants, refugees, or non-nationals. Despite the AU's efforts to promote unity, xenophobic sentiments and violence persist across several African countries, undermining socio-economic stability, social cohesion, and continental integration. This article examines the challenges xenophobia poses

to African unity and regional integration while exploring the AU's response and proposing strategies to address these issues. The findings reveal that xenophobia affects various socio-economic dimensions, including employment, education, and access to resources for African migrants and host communities. Migrants, often viewed as economic threats, face exclusion from job opportunities and essential services, leading to disrupted livelihoods and perpetuated cycles of poverty. Moreover, xenophobia undermines Agenda 2063's goals by hindering intra-African mobility, damaging social cohesion, and weakening the foundations of a unified Africa (Paalo, Adu-Gyamfi & Arthur, 2022). Although the AU has publicly condemned xenophobic violence and encouraged protective policies, critics argue that its responses lack enforcement and proactive strategies to curb xenophobia at its roots. The study concludes that xenophobia remains a significant barrier to achieving the AU's aspirations for a prosperous and integrated Africa. The AU must reinforce its commitment to inclusivity and cooperation among member states to foster lasting unity (Delaila, 2019). Therefore, we recommend that the AU and its member states conduct educational campaigns that promote Pan-Africanism and the economic contributions of migrants. This would change how people think about these issues, make anti-discrimination laws stronger, and improve border and migration policies. All of these changes would make integration easier and lower tensions between communities.

**Keywords:** *Xenophobia, African Union, regional integration, socio-economic impact, Pan-Africanism, African unity.*

## **Introduction**

Unity and solidarity marked Africa's anti-colonial movements and her early independence. The African Union (AU) has been trying to integrate the region for many years through regional strategic visions and policy frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa (1980–2000). Agenda 2063's goal is to make Africa "an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena" ("The Africa We Want" – 2013). Sadly, xenophobia is undermining the continent's regional integration (Akinola, 2019; Khalema, 2018). Bilal (2016) said that the goal of African integration is still a long way off, even though there have been decades of policy plans and academic discussions on continental governance. This is because of racist or xenophobic actions and policies, bad political leadership, neocolonialism, political instability, inconsistent attempts at integration, and the failure of real

integration on a continental level. Onditi (2021) noted that xenophobia affects cultural exchanges, security, trade, and politics, making it Africa's biggest integration concern.

Similarly, Okem, Asuelime, and Adekoye (2015) asserted that African leaders have yet to acknowledge and address the damaging impact of xenophobia on Africa's integration trajectory. This is so, as Ottuh (2020) contended, that xenophobic violence targets not only foreign nationals but also local indigenes who are mistakenly considered "foreign" or from another country. Durokifa and Ijeoma (2017) observed that xenophobia has been expressed in Africa at different periods in the form of harassment, attacks, and discrimination against foreigners in South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Egypt, and Egypt. Xenophobia in Egypt targeted refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa.

More so, Somali natives and migrants have been subjects of xenophobic attacks in Kenya and other human rights abuses due to their prejudicial profile as pirates and terrorists (Human Rights Watch, 2014). After the deposition of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, xenophobia in the country rose. Kofi Busia's new administration issued the harsh Aliens Compliance Order, which led to the expulsion and harsh conditions of aliens from Nigeria and Burkina Faso. In response, hundreds of Ghanaians were expelled from Nigeria in the early 1980s (Ucham, 2014). In a similar context, foreign nationals, mainly from Nigeria and other African countries, were attacked, killed, dispossessed, or stripped of their properties in 2019 by some South Africans in the belief that they were threatening their economic recovery and their jobs (Ezeji & Mbagwu, 2020).

Instructively, Ottuh (2020) observed that many African socioeconomic concerns in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as apartheid and colonialism, prompted an "integrative approach" to solve them. Sadly, disintegration among African states is being caused by xenophobic attacks on fellow Africans. This is so because xenophobia is destroying the security, peace, and development of Africa, which has hampered the integration and achievement of pan-Africanism. It is against the above backdrop that the AU should address Africa's escalating xenophobic attacks to boost continental integration in Africa. Although scholars and the AU denounce xenophobia, xenophobic attacks nevertheless occur occasionally in Africa. They also haven't been able to deal with the negative effects of xenophobia on the regional socio-economic emancipation of Africa. This is why this study was

needed to look into the problems xenophobia causes for African unity and regional integration, as well as the AU's response and possible solutions.

## **Historical Context of the Formation of the African Union**

The aspiration to foster unity, cooperation, and independence following decades of colonial rule led to the formation of the African Union (AU). The AU's predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), was established in 1963 to promote political solidarity, support decolonisation, and resist neocolonial influences (South African History Online, SAHO, 2023). While the OAU made significant strides in advancing the cause of African independence, its limitations in enforcing political stability and economic integration led to the creation of the AU in 2002 (Dogah, 2022). According to Nwokoroeze (2024), the AU aimed to go beyond political unity, addressing broader socio-economic and developmental challenges facing African nations. Its vision of "an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa" underscores a commitment to regional integration and collective progress. This historical context frames the AU's role in championing African unity and provides insight into the organisation's responsibility to address issues, like xenophobia, that threaten the ideals of Pan-Africanism.

## **The conceptual view of xenophobia and its place in Africa**

Xenophobia in Africa refers to negative feelings and discriminatory behaviour towards outsiders, particularly immigrants, refugees, or non-nationals. For Akinola (2017), xenophobia refers to the discriminatory actions directed at those who are considered non-nationals or different from those deemed the original inhabitants or nationals of a particular territory or polity. It manifests through exclusion, demonisation, and rejection of individuals based on their foreign status or perceived difference from the native population (Marumo, Chakale & Mothelesi, 2019). According to Okem, Asuelime, and Adekoye (2015), xenophobia is marked by anti-foreign attitudes, a deep-seated hatred of other nationalities, an irrational fear of outsiders, and an overemphasis on strong nationalism.

In this context, Adeola (2015) notes that xenophobia has been a persistent issue, deeply rooted in hostile attitudes, discriminatory language, and violent actions against immigrants from neighbouring

countries. These prejudices often result in the expulsion of foreigners, violent attacks, and general hostility, particularly in areas where immigrants are perceived as a threat to the local population's economic or social well-being. Everatt (2011) attributes xenophobia in Africa to deep systemic economic and social disparities, township competitiveness, historical violence, lack of adequate housing, and the exploitation of cheap labour. Akinola (2020) points out that the failures of regional organisations like the African Union (AU), poor political governance, and political instability exacerbate xenophobic sentiments.

Several have linked xenophobia in Africa to specific historical and economic contexts. For example, the Ghana-Nigeria conflict in the 1960s stands as a significant case of xenophobic policies. When Ghana's then-Prime Minister, Kofi Abrefa Busia, issued the "Alien Compliance Order" in 1969, it aimed to expel illegal immigrants, primarily due to Ghana's economic decline following political upheaval after the removal of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. One could argue that the country's economic troubles scapegoated immigrants, particularly Nigerians. Brobbey (2018) further highlights that economic factors, such as the belief that foreign nationals are taking over local markets, fuel widespread hostility towards migrants in Ghana. Similarly, in 1983, Nigeria expelled over two million migrants, mainly Ghanaians, as part of a response to economic and political challenges (Gary-Tounkara, 2015). This led to long-lasting animosity between the two nations, marked by the "Ghana Must Go" campaign, which referred to the mass expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria and the attacks on Nigerians in Ghana.

The expulsion of Asian migrants from Uganda in 1972 under Idi Amin's regime and the 1978 expulsion of Beninese nationals from Gabon are additional examples of xenophobic actions with economic underpinnings (Paalo, Adu-Gyamfi & Arthur, 2022). Similarly, in the Ivory Coast, the institutionalisation of "Ivorian identity" in the 1980s, spurred by tensions between local Ivorian farmers and Burkinabe migrants, led to the expulsion of approximately 12,000 Burkinabes (Wiafe-Amoako, 2015). Adebajor (2011) observed that the expulsion of Democratic Republic of Congo nationals from Angola was attributed to the belief that they were looting the country's natural resources.

In South Africa, xenophobia has drawn the most academic attention. The country's history of colonialism and apartheid has significantly shaped contemporary xenophobic attitudes. Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh, and Singh (2005) argue that large-scale immigration from other African nations, coupled with South Africa's troubled history, has contributed to

the rise in xenophobic violence. The Apartheid-era Group Areas Act displaced millions of South Africans, pushing them into ethnically segregated communities, which fostered racial and ethnic tensions that continue to manifest in xenophobic violence against African migrants (Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh & Singh, 2005). Following the end of apartheid, Black South Africans began using violence against Black non-nationals, driven by fears of economic competition and the perception that foreigners were stealing jobs and draining public resources (Steenkamp, 2009).

Economic and social factors fuel xenophobia in South Africa, as they do in other African countries. Steenkamp (2009) notes that economic competition, the belief that foreigners are criminals or burdens on the economy, and the pressure on public services have been significant drivers of xenophobic attitudes. During the 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa, violent assaults claimed the lives of approximately 60 foreign nationals, including Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Somalis, and Ghanaians (Kersting, 2009). Swaziland, Lesotho, and Botswana migrants in South Africa generally face less hostility compared to migrants from Zimbabwe or Mozambique, due to the latter's perceived competition for resources (Steenkamp, 2009).

People often cite issues like unemployment and underdevelopment as major contributors to xenophobia in Africa. Steenkamp (2009) contends that ineffective governance frequently uses migrants as scapegoats for broader structural problems. National frustrations over poor governance and economic mismanagement often lead to the vilification of foreigners as the cause of societal woes. Beyond the economic dimension, other elements also trigger xenophobia. For example, Bordeau (2010) suggests that prejudices against outsiders—what he calls "Afrophobia"—are often based on misconceptions that foreigners are responsible for societal problems, such as disease spread, crime, and job theft. Adeola (2015) argues that the media plays a crucial role in fuelling xenophobia through sensationalist reporting, which reinforces negative stereotypes about migrants. Media coverage in South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria, for instance, often perpetuates myths about migrants by making them targets of public hostility. Unfortunately, the inability of concerned government institutions to regulate such coverage has complicated the issue.

Adeola (2015) further suggests that colonial legacies continue to play a role in contemporary xenophobia in Africa. The arbitrary borders imposed by colonial powers have created artificial national identities that

reinforce the "foreign/other" dichotomy. Kersting (2009) echoes this sentiment, noting that nationalism, as promoted by colonial boundaries, has often excluded various social groups from access to state resources, which is then used as a justification for xenophobic attitudes. In conclusion, while economic factors such as unemployment and underdevelopment remain central to the phenomenon of xenophobia in Africa, other social, political, and historical factors also contribute significantly to its persistence. The role of media, the legacy of colonialism, and the ongoing challenges of state governance all play crucial roles in shaping the xenophobic attitudes that continue to hinder African integration and unity.

### **The effects of xenophobia in Africa**

Xenophobia has had significant socio-economic consequences across Africa. It has created tensions between African countries and has the potential to divide them further if left unaddressed. Mkhize (2019) observed that after the 2019 xenophobic attacks on foreigners in South Africa, Zambia took a stand by cancelling a scheduled friendly football match with South Africa in Lusaka. Madagascar swiftly stepped in to replace Zambia but later withdrew over similar concerns. Zambian student protesters rallied, shutting down commercial centres in the capital Lusaka, and Hot FM, a well-known local radio station in Zambia, declared that it would halt playing South African music until further notice (Mkhize, 2019). This development seriously harmed the relationship and economy of both countries.

Mkhize (2019) further observed that in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), protests in Lubumbashi saw demonstrators smashing the windows of the South African embassy and looting South African-owned businesses. Meanwhile, in 2019, Nigeria's foreign minister, Geoffrey Onyeama, expressed deep emotional outrage, prompting the Nigerian government to withdraw from the 2019 World Economic Forum in Cape Town (Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2017). The Nigerian government also recalled its high commissioner in South Africa (Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2017). Prominent Nigerian musician, Tiwa Savage, cancelled her concert in South Africa in protest. At the same time, Adams Oshiomhole, then-national chairman of Nigeria's ruling All Progressives Congress, called for a boycott of South African goods and services. He even proposed the nationalisation of South African-owned businesses like MTN and the revocation of South African Airways' landing rights unless the

xenophobic violence ceased. He declared, "Nigeria needs to show that we are not chickens to be molested" (Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2017). The economic loss during this period was massive.

Xenophobic sentiments often view migrants as a threat to local economic stability (Chisadza, 2024). This perception leads to discrimination in the job market, with migrants being excluded from employment opportunities or forced into informal or precarious jobs with little job security or legal protection (Szaflarski & Bauldry, 2019). According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM, 2001), in countries where xenophobia is prevalent, migrant workers are often blamed for high unemployment rates or declining wages, despite evidence that they contribute positively to the economy by creating jobs and supporting businesses. Xenophobic violence, such as the targeting of migrant-owned businesses, exacerbates these issues. Okunade and Awosusi (2023) observed that when shops and establishments owned by migrants are destroyed or looted, the resulting economic disruption ripples through local economies, affecting both the migrants and the local population. This leads to the loss of livelihoods and damages the overall economic health of affected communities, as businesses are forced to close, and economic activity slows down. Addressing these socio-economic dimensions of xenophobia is crucial for fostering greater integration and unity across African nations.

### **Xenophobia as a Challenge to Regional Integration: The African Union's Position and Initiatives**

Xenophobia poses a formidable challenge to the African Union's (AU) vision of a united and integrated Africa (Mlambo, Dlamini, Makgoba & Mtshali, 2023). As an organisation dedicated to promoting peace, security, and socioeconomic integration across the continent, the AU views xenophobic violence as a direct threat to its foundational principles of unity and solidarity among African nations. Xenophobia disrupts the free movement of people, labour, and goods, undermining the AU's economic cooperation and integration goals, as envisioned in Agenda 2063 (Ndaba, 2023). According to Massayand Susan (2023), incidents of anti-immigrant violence, particularly in countries experiencing high levels of economic inequality and unemployment, have highlighted the difficulty of achieving these integration goals in the face of xenophobic sentiments.

AU has repeatedly condemned xenophobic attacks (see, for instance, the 2019 and 2015 AU's condemnation of xenophobic attacks in South Africa, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo), issuing statements that call on member states to protect foreign nationals and denounce acts of violence against immigrants. In some cases, AU representatives have visited affected countries, aiming to foster dialogue and cooperation with local governments on how to best safeguard the rights and safety of migrants. Makaya (2023) noted that the AU has also emphasised that xenophobia runs counter to the principles outlined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which calls for protecting all Africans regardless of their nationality. But some people have said that these efforts have been too shallow and reactive (Olofinbiyi, 2022). They say that the AU has only responded to specific acts of violence instead of putting in place long-term plans to deal with the causes of xenophobia.

One of the challenges the AU faces in addressing xenophobia lies in the limited enforcement mechanisms at its disposal (Adeola, 2015). While the AU can issue recommendations and encourage member states to adopt anti-xenophobia policies, it lacks the power to enforce binding resolutions (Makaya, 2023). As a result, many governments may fail to take meaningful action against xenophobia, especially when it involves politically sensitive issues related to unemployment, public resources, or immigration (John-Langba, 2022). To strengthen its position, the AU could consider developing more robust frameworks to monitor and assess member states' compliance with anti-xenophobia measures. For instance, the establishment of an independent monitoring body could document xenophobic incidents across the continent and hold governments accountable when they fail to protect migrants.

More so, xenophobia action plans are needed despite the African Charter and the AU's Migration Policy Framework promoting human rights and inclusive policies. Preventative interventions could include education programs to promote Pan-African unity and counter migrant prejudices (Adeola, 2015). Furthermore, Gächter (2022) suggests that the AU could encourage member states to introduce legal protections for migrants, such as anti-discrimination laws that apply specifically to xenophobic behaviour and ensure that perpetrators face appropriate consequences. Long-term, better tools like monitoring systems, financial rewards for member states that enforce anti-racism laws, and stricter immigration policies could help the AU's work and show its dedication to African unity.

## **AU Agenda 2063: Opportunities and Threats**

Agenda 2063, adopted on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2015, is the African Union's ambitious, long-term blueprint for fostering "an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens." Encompassing a vision for economic, social, and political transformation, Agenda 2063 aspires to create a continent where free movement, economic integration, and cultural unity are foundational principles (African Union, 2019). The framework prioritises inclusive growth, peace, good governance, and shared prosperity—imagining a future where all Africans enjoy freedom of movement, access to opportunities, and mutual respect across borders. However, xenophobia presents a significant challenge to achieving the goals outlined in Agenda 2063 (Ukaeje, 2022). Xenophobic violence and anti-immigrant sentiments, which have surfaced in several African countries, run counter to the agenda's vision of unity and integration. According to Mogohu (2021), in countries where xenophobic tensions are prevalent, migrants often face hostility, social exclusion, and even physical attacks, which makes it difficult for them to contribute to local economies or access basic services safely. So, such violence undermines the AU's goal of easing intra-African mobility, one of the pillars of economic integration. For instance, the free movement of labour is critical to shared economic growth, as it allows for skill transfers, enhances cultural exchange, and supports filling labour gaps across sectors.

Xenophobia also disrupts social cohesion by fostering divisions based on nationality or ethnicity, contrary to Agenda 2063's call for "an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values, and ethics" (African Union, 2019). Instead of unity, xenophobia fosters distrust and resentment, which can further entrench stereotypes and misinformation. This hinders Africans from collectively experiencing the benefits of integration, such as shared resources, economic opportunities, and cross-cultural understanding (Kutor et al., 2021). It also prevents African communities from building a strong, inclusive identity that encompasses diverse cultural and national backgrounds. In a continent where many regions are already struggling with economic inequality and high unemployment (World Bank, 2024), xenophobic attitudes often intensify, particularly in areas where migrants are perceived as competing for limited resources.

In addition to its socio-economic impact, xenophobia threatens the political stability and peace agenda that Agenda 2063 seeks to uphold

(Okorie, 2024). Violence against foreign nationals disrupts peace within and between countries, damaging diplomatic relations and undermining efforts to foster political unity on the continent (Okorie, 2024). Additionally, xenophobia can prompt retaliatory attacks in other nations, fuelling cycles of hostility and potentially destabilising regional security (Akinola, 2020).

By positioning xenophobia as a direct obstacle to Agenda 2063, the AU has an opportunity to galvanise member states into action, emphasising that eliminating xenophobic sentiments is essential for achieving Africa's long-term vision. To deal with this problem, the AU could push for stronger measures against xenophobia, such as education campaigns that encourage unity among African countries and policy changes that protect migrants and help reach the goals of the agenda. For example, setting up youth exchange programs, creating cross-border economic initiatives, and encouraging collaborative projects could foster understanding and diminish xenophobic attitudes among African citizens (Paalo, Adu-Gyamfi & Arthur, 2022).

## **Policy Recommendations for the African Union and Member States**

To effectively counter the rising tide of xenophobia across the continent, the African Union (AU) and its member states need to implement a range of inclusive, proactive policies. This includes:

**1. Educational campaigns on Pan-Africanism and migrant contributions:** Public education initiatives highlighting the principles of Pan-Africanism could reshape perceptions of unity and shared African identity. Campaigns should focus on the cultural, economic, and social contributions immigrants bring to host communities, emphasizing that migration is a cornerstone of Africa's shared history. Educational institutions, media outlets, and community programs could all play a role in promoting narratives of diversity and mutual benefit.

**2. Strengthening anti-discrimination and protection laws:** Governments must establish robust anti-discrimination laws that directly address xenophobic violence and harassment. By creating legal frameworks that explicitly protect migrants, African nations can ensure accountability for xenophobic actions. This may involve prosecuting offenders and imposing penalties on those who incite xenophobic

sentiments or violence, sending a strong message that xenophobia will not be tolerated.

**3. Protective frameworks for migrants:** Member states could develop protective frameworks that guarantee fundamental rights and services for migrants, such as healthcare, education, and legal representation. Providing secure, accessible channels for reporting discrimination or violence, along with the assurance of legal support, can empower migrants to seek help without fear of reprisal.

**4. Improving border and migration policies:** Harmonizing borders and migration policies across the continent would facilitate smoother transitions and reduce friction between migrants and host communities. The AU could help member states establish standardized migration processes, encouraging the lawful, organized, and humane treatment of migrants. Improved border management, including community sensitization programs in areas with high migrant populations, could ease local tensions and improve relationships between migrants and residents.

**5. Economic incentives for inclusive employment:** Economic development programs that create opportunities for locals and migrants can foster a cooperative environment. Governments might consider job-creation initiatives or incentivize companies to hire from diverse backgrounds, reducing competition and fostering a sense of shared economic progress. Encouraging entrepreneurship, particularly for migrant-owned businesses, could also contribute to local economic development while integrating migrants into the economic fabric of host communities.

**6. Promoting cultural exchange programs:** Cultural exchange initiatives could allow host communities and migrant populations to engage more deeply with one another, building understanding and appreciation. These programs could include community events, school partnerships, and exchange opportunities that showcase diverse African cultures and promote social cohesion.

**7. Collaborating with civil society and NGOs:** AU could partner with civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to facilitate grassroots efforts against xenophobia. Such organisations

often have close ties to communities, can effectively advocate for inclusion, and provide support services to migrants.

**8. Monitoring and reporting mechanisms:** Implementing AU-backed monitoring systems to track and report incidents of xenophobia would enable better data collection, facilitating responsive policy measures. These mechanisms could include anonymous reporting hotlines, digital reporting tools, and regular assessments of xenophobic incidents, allowing governments to address trends and intervene where necessary. Implementing these policy recommendations could support the AU's vision for a united and inclusive Africa, reducing xenophobia and strengthening the foundations of regional integration. The AU and its member states can make meaningful progress toward a more harmonious and unified continent through these means.

## **9. Conclusion**

Xenophobia remains a pressing threat to Africa's socio-economic stability, unity, and shared vision for integration. For the African Union (AU) and its member states, coordinated action against xenophobia is both urgent and essential—not only to protect the rights and dignity of African migrants but also to advance the continent's larger aspirations for unity and sustainable development. By enacting decisive, inclusive measures that foster tolerance and mutual respect, the AU can help build an Africa where national borders serve as bridges, not barriers, to African unity.

To create a cohesive, inclusive Africa, the AU's commitment to counteracting xenophobia must extend from policy statements to tangible, enforceable actions. This includes strengthening protective frameworks, improving social and economic opportunities for migrants and host communities, and fostering a shared understanding of Africa's collective identity and interdependence. Such steps will help dismantle the conditions that fuel xenophobic sentiments and replace them with pathways for cooperation, mutual benefit, and shared progress. An Africa free from xenophobia is on the path to realising Agenda 2063's vision of integration, peace, and prosperity. As Africa moves forward, the AU's leadership and sustained commitment will be crucial in shaping a future where xenophobia no longer hinders the continent's journey toward unity. By prioritising the protection of all Africans—regardless of nationality—the AU can lay the groundwork for a truly united and

resilient Africa, ensuring that xenophobia has no place in the continent's sociopolitical landscape (Delaila, 2019).

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