

April 17 2007: Launch of
City's help desk

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Speech by the Executive Mayor of Johannesburg, Cllr Amos Masondo at the launch of the city's help desk for migrants, C J Cronje building, inner-city - Johannesburg.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is indeed a great honour and privilege for me to share this day with you and be part of this very important launch – the City of Johannesburg's Help Desk for migrants.

Programme Director, the discovery of gold in 1886 laid a basis for the founding of the City of Johannesburg. Since its early development Johannesburg has had a broad cosmopolitan character. This was reflected in the recruitment of skilled white mineworkers from the British and Australian coalmines, the Chinese mineworkers, the African mineworkers from the then German East Africa, whilst local labour was constituted of Africans from the so called native reserves and neighbouring territories.

The City of Johannesburg, much like the country – South Africa, was conceived as a colonial enclave and a preserve of the white sections of the population. The introduction of institutionalised racism, Apartheid meant that blacks were regarded as temporary sojourners in the white cities or towns. That they were here to work in the mines, industries and provide services.

The philosophy of Apartheid also meant the imposition forced removals of Africans, Coloureds and Indians to the periphery of a City. This added the Apartheid spatial form to the complex problem of racism.

In the past few years the developing world has experienced rapid rates of urbanisation and migration. In Africa alone, urban growth rates, according to the UN Habitat, has grown by up to 10%. One of the major driving factors of urbanisation and migration has been the powerful force of globalisation. Whilst the latter contains within itself certain positive elements, it has also led to an uneven development and the exacerbation of inequalities within and amongst cities and led to a greater sense of social exclusion.

It is important to note that although international migration is increasingly being experienced in many cities in the South, it is a "long time phenomenon" in the developed world.

The majority of governments, both national and local have tend to adopt an official position that opposes the inflow of foreign nationals into their designated territories. But despite the seemingly rigorous immigration controls the "migration industry" "has appeared in both sending and host countries". This includes recruiters, specialised travel agencies and lawyers.

What is also generally known is the following:

- Official surveys, census and registration instruments largely underestimates the dimension of international migration.
- In countries with restrictive access policies the main method used by unregistered migrants is legal entry and overstay (South Africa and Thailand).

- In other countries access is relatively easier but the absence of migration policy makes registration very difficult or even an impossible task (Brazil, Senegal, Mexico and Russia).
- Migrants tend to find employment in the low paid sectors and take job positions eschewed by locals or end up entering a limited range of activities in the expanding informal sector e.g. construction, services and domestic work.
- A growing number of migrants consider the city where they settle as a transit point. This means amongst others that they want to return home or want to move to another destination of greater economic activity.
- There are different types of migrants with different types of motives: looking for better paying jobs in both the formal and informal sector; domestic workers; single women migrating to support the family left back home and women joining their husbands, asylum seekers and students.

An undesirable consequence of migration is xenophobia. Xenophobia is typically used to describe fear or dislike of foreigners or people different from oneself. Foreigners (and even internal migrants) in many countries have been subjected to a variety of attacks (both verbal and physical) and other human rights abuses.

Migration policy is generally set at national government level. This is primarily so because migration is seen by many states as a security issue. This is further complicated by the fact that many migrants do not register and they avoid revealing their presence. This tends to make many local governments to absolve themselves from any responsibilities with regard to developing approaches to deal with challenges faced by migrants.

The City of Johannesburg is adopting a progressive approach with regards to ensuring that migrants to this City feel that they are part of an 'inclusive city'. The City, through its Community Development Department, has developed a Support Strategy for migrants. This Strategy is informed by the City's Human Development Strategy (Council's strategic framework for addressing poverty, inequality and social exclusion).

In August 2006, the City hosted a three-day workshop on Migration and Urban Governance in partnership with the South African Migration Project (SAMP), the South African Cities Network (SACN) and the Municipal Development Partnership for Eastern & Southern Africa (MDP). During that workshop as a City, we said that one of the key outputs of our Strategy would be the establishment of a City Help Desk to assist in addressing issues affecting foreign nationals.

Programme Director, we are here today to translate our commitment to action. The Help Desk will be accommodated here at Region F Peoples Centre, at the ground floor, C J Cronje Building.

The Helpdesk will look at the following:

- Advice on how to access appropriate government services;
- Co-ordinate the City's support for migrants;
- At refugees and economic opportunities;
- Provide information and accommodate various service providers;
- Examine community networks; and

- Needs of asylum seekers amongst others.

The Johannesburg's City-Support Strategy on migrants also includes an awareness campaign aimed at addressing the following xenophobia related challenges:

- With partner organisations, we will undertake an anti-xenophobia awareness campaign targeted at raising community awareness around status and rights of different categories of migrants (asylum seekers, refugees, foreign residents on study permits, illegal immigrants, etc) to celebrate their cultures.
- We will explore unity in action and ensure that both the foreign nationals and the local municipalities work in close collaboration to achieve the jointly agreed goals.
- With partner organisations, we will undertake an internal anti-xenophobia awareness campaign targeting health workers, frontline staff, Johannesburg Metro Police officers, amongst others on the status and rights of different categories of migrants and, where possible and appropriate, extend this to target other spheres of government with operations in Johannesburg.
- Establish joint forums with social networks/associations of migrants to systematically identify concerns, address constraints, and develop mutually supportive partnerships.
- We will approach the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and civil society organisations with a view to establish a partnership to pilot a South Africa specific urban-based refugee and human trafficking corrective action initiative.
- Migrant communities have also offered to help where language barriers might exist, mainly with French, Portuguese, and Swahili speakers.

In our observation, migrants fall in different categories:

- Those that are temporary legal contract workers;
- Those with marketable skills;
- Those that are forced migrants (refugees); and
- Those that are irregular and undocumented.

Migrants also contribute to enhancing the richness and cultural diversity of a city. New forms of artistic expressions as well as the contribution they make to enhance competitive sports help to collectively create a better and more vibrant social-scape for a city. The increasingly cosmopolitan nature of many of our cities provides a basis to more effectively promote the concept of 'strength in diversity'. In our case, this is demonstrated through the annual Joburg Carnival.

Like urbanisation, it seems migration can and should be managed. It cannot be completely controlled let alone halted.

Local government in South Africa, including the City of Johannesburg, is committed to ensuring that all those who live within its jurisdiction and abide by the country's laws have a decent quality of life.

It is important that the City should continue to grapple with the challenges of migration, diversity and urban governance. This is so in spite of their limited financial resources.

Recognition of diversity as a source of urban strength and enrichment rather than a problem is a first step towards equity and participation. Hence, today, Programme Director, the City of Johannesburg is proud to initiate this Help Desk for migrants. This approach should be embraced and supported by all public representatives.

Programme Director, our sincere appreciation goes out to our partners, the Non Governmental Organisations, who have pledged their support and agreed to provide the necessary human resources to support this Help Desk for migrants.

Our partners are Refugee Children's Project, Jesuit Refugee Without Voice, Bienvenue Shelter, Lawyers for Human Rights, South African Migration Project (SAMP), United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Wits University Law Faculty (Refugee Desk), and Black Sash.

I wish to take this opportunity to urge all the stakeholders to remain united and committed to this important project.

Thank you.
