WCPDF
WESTERN CAPE PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT FORUM

Media Release – 8 September 2026

Xenophobia: Will Infrastructure Investment Suffer?

Opinion Editorial by Deon van Zyl, Chairperson, Western Cape Property Development Forum (WCPDF)

South Africa has every right, and indeed an obligation, to control its borders, enforce its immigration laws and ensure that people working in the country do so lawfully. Law, order and associated rules do matter.

But rules and regulations cannot be considered in isolation from economic reality. Nor should the enforcement of these rules obscure failures by the State itself.

This is particularly important for the construction and property development industry.

SOUTH AFRICA'S ARTISAN SKILLS GAP

For decades, ineffective border management, migration from neighbouring countries and the realities of the Southern African labour market have combined to create a substantial flow of construction workers into South Africa. Among them have been many highly capable artisans such as bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, plasterers, tilers and other tradespeople. The construction industry responded as markets do. Where skills were available, they were employed.

At the same time, South Africa has not produced enough of its own artisans. This is where the discussion becomes uncomfortable. We cannot build infrastructure without people who can build. South Africa regularly speaks about infrastructure investment as one of the principal mechanisms through which we intend to stimulate economic growth, create employment and improve living conditions. Nothing wrong with this ambition.

But alas, infrastructure is not built by policy documents, budgets or announcements. Ultimately, someone must lay the bricks, install the pipes, wire the buildings, construct the roofs and complete the finishes. We therefore need to ask a basic question: Do we have enough skilled artisans to deliver the infrastructure programme we are planning or aspire to see?

For the property development and construction industries, the answer is increasingly concerning. South Africa has institutions specifically intended to address construction skills development. The Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA) occupies a central position in construction-

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sector skills development, while other institutions, including the NHBRC, have important responsibilities relating to training and development within the housing construction sector. Yet contractors continue to experience shortages of competent artisans.

The uncomfortable reality is that foreign workers have, to a significant extent, filled a skills gap that South Africa's own training system has failed to fill.

That does not mean immigration laws should simply be ignored. It means that government cannot reasonably allow skills-development institutions to underperform for years and then assume that the construction industry can immediately dispense with the foreign skills that filled the resulting vacuum.

WHEN IMMIGRATION POLICY MEETS ECONOMIC REALITY

Xenophobia is not a skills policy. Recent campaigns directed at undocumented foreign nationals have again brought immigration to the forefront of public debate.

There is an important distinction to be made here. Enforcing immigration law is the responsibility of the State. Xenophobia, hostility towards people simply because they come from elsewhere in Africa or elsewhere in the world, is something entirely different. Neither should be confused with the economic question facing the construction industry.

If a bricklayer, carpenter, plumber or electrician possesses a skill that South Africa urgently needs, the rational policy question should be: How do we ensure that this skill is available legally while simultaneously training South Africans to fill these positions? Simply removing skilled people from the labour market does not train a South African artisan to replace them. It merely removes the skill.

For an economy already struggling to achieve acceptable growth rates, and which is simultaneously placing enormous expectations on infrastructure investment, that distinction matters. The time has come to treat construction skills as a scarce resource.

It is also time to reconsider how South Africa approaches artisan skills within its immigration system. Where demonstrable shortages exist, appropriately qualified construction artisans should be regarded as a scarce economic resource. Immigration and work-permit arrangements should make it possible for these skills to enter and remain in South Africa legally and efficiently.

A sensible system could link access to scarce foreign artisan skills with structured apprenticeship and skills-transfer programmes. Experienced artisans working in South Africa could become part of the solution to our domestic skills shortage rather than being characterised simply as part of an immigration problem.

Imagine, for example, an infrastructure programme in which the employment of appropriately qualified foreign artisans is accompanied by a requirement or incentive to train South African apprentices. Instead of losing skills, we will multiply them. That would surely make more economic sense than allowing a skills shortage to become an additional constraint on infrastructure investment delaying delivery and pushing up prices.

The construction and property industries should themselves be asking much harder questions about the institutions responsible for producing the skills the country requires. If artisan shortages persist despite decades of skills-development levies, institutional structures and training mandates, we should ask where the measurable return on this investment is?

How many competent bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers and electricians are being produced annually? How does this compare with industry demand? Where are the shortages? What interventions are being implemented to address them? And who is accountable when the system repeatedly fails to deliver?

These are questions that should be directed by industry at CETA and the Department of Higher Education and Training, and, within the housing construction environment, at the NHBRC and the Department of Human Settlements.

Accountability should not be controversial. If government expects the private sector to comply with legislation, regulations, building standards, employment requirements and immigration laws, industry is equally entitled to expect public institutions to perform the functions for which they were established.

WITHOUT CAPACITY, INFRASTRUCTURE REMAINS A PIPE DREAM RATHER THAN A PIPELINE

Infrastructure ambitions require construction capacity. South Africa faces an enormous infrastructure challenge. We need housing. We need roads. We need water and sanitation infrastructure. We need electricity infrastructure. We need schools, hospitals, industrial facilities and commercial development.

All of this requires capital. But capital without implementation capacity does not produce infrastructure. South Africa therefore needs to recognise artisan capacity as part of its national infrastructure strategy.

That requires us to aggressively rebuilding our domestic artisan-training pipeline. It means holding the institutions responsible for training accountable for measurable outcomes. And, until domestic supply meets demand, it means creating sensible legal pathways through which genuinely scarce foreign skills can participate in the South African economy.

Border enforcement, skills development and economic growth should not be competing policy objectives. A competent state should be capable of pursuing all three simultaneously.
The worst possible outcome would be to remove skilled artisans from the economy, fail to train South Africans to replace them, and then wonder why infrastructure projects become more expensive, take longer to complete or cannot be delivered at the scale envisaged.

If South Africa genuinely intends to build its way towards higher economic growth, we need to make sure we have enough people who know how to build. Without implementation capacity infrastructure investment will remain a pipe dream.

ENDS

MORE ABOUT THE WESTERN CAPE PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT FORUM (WCPDF)

The Western Cape Property Development Forum (WCPDF) was founded in 2008, and is today a registered non-profit, membership-based organisation (246-760 NPO).

***OUR VISION** is to create awareness, address the challenges that face the property development and construction industry and to be the collective voice of that industry in the Western Cape. We focus on the full production line of private and public property projects and associated infrastructure provision.*

***OUR MISSION** is to actively engage and lobby politicians and government representatives and provide detailed input, guidance and feedback on draft legislation and policy. We make the public sector aware of the ramifications that decision-making processes and service delivery have on property development and construction and, in turn, the economy and most importantly jobs. And while the industry is always impacted by national legislation, the most critical development issues tend to occur at ground level, and therefore our emphasis is regional. Property is produced at municipal level.*

Our key focus areas:

- *To be a representative body for the property development and construction industry in the Western Cape that is recognised by relevant authorities, especially in terms of the vital role that the industry plays in the province's economy through investment and job creation.*
- *To promote the interests of the property development and construction industry.*
- *To interpret and facilitate understanding between the authorities and the industry.*
- *To inform our membership of changes in legislation and policies.*
- *To create a public profile and understanding of our industry towards making the greater Western Cape sensitive to the need for property development.*
- *To actively engage in the education and transformation of our industry.*

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