



Post-apartheid mobility and migration on South Africa's urban peripheries

Gautam Makwana

ABSTRACT

Since 1994, South Africa's cities have been reshaped by intense internal migration and cross-border flows. These movements have expanded informal settlements and peripheral townships, exposing the persistence of spatial inequality despite ambitious post-apartheid reforms. Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban illustrate how urban peripheries remain sites of exclusion, where migrants—both domestic and foreign—struggle to secure housing, services, and livelihoods. While state programmes such as RDP housing and settlement upgrading have improved material conditions, they often reproduce inherited divisions by relocating low-income households far from opportunity. Migrants confront additional barriers of documentation, xenophobia, and insecure tenure, leaving them vulnerable to displacement and marginalisation. This paper reviews empirical scholarship on mobility, informality, and urban governance, arguing that prevailing frameworks neglect the lived realities of mobile populations. It calls for participatory, rights-based planning that recognises migration as central to urban transformation and essential to building inclusive South African cities.

Keywords: *Post-Apartheid Urbanism, Internal Migration, Informal Settlements, Cross-Border Migration, Spatial Inequality, Urban Peripheries.*

Introduction

The democratic transition of 1994 marked a profound rupture in South Africa's political and social landscape. Yet, despite the dismantling of apartheid legislation, the spatial imprint of segregation remains deeply embedded in the country's urban form. Cities such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban continue to exhibit stark divisions between affluent scores and impoverished peripheries (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010). Ambitious policy frameworks—including the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Urban Development Framework, and the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) sought to redress these inequalities. However, their material effects have

Dr. Gautam Makwana, Ph.D. (Social Work), Social Scientist & IEC Member, Institute of Teaching and Research in Ayurveda (ITRA), Institute of National Importance (INI), Ministry of AYUSH, Government of India, Jamnagar-361001, Gujarat, India. Email: gautam_makwana@hotmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2749-1367

been uneven, often reproducing inherited hierarchies rather than dismantling them (Turok, 2016).

Urban transformation discourse has emphasised inclusion, empowerment, and growth, but empirical research shows limited impact on the daily lives of the urban poor (Charlton, 2018). Informal settlements, peripheral townships, and transit camps remain characterised by weak infrastructure, insecure tenure, and restricted access to employment. This paper critically reviews scholarship on post-apartheid urban change, focusing on mobility, migration, and informality, and asks whether South Africa's transformation agenda has meaningfully advanced spatial justice and urban citizenship (Harrison, 2006; Lemanski, 2020).

Urban peripheries and historical migration

Apartheid planning deliberately produced peripheral spaces through legislation such as the Group Areas Act (1950) and Pass Laws, which relocated Black, Coloured, and Indian populations away from economic centres (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). Although repealed in the early 1990s, these policies left enduring inequalities in land access, transport, and services (Turok & Borel-Saladin, 2016).

Today, peripheral settlements are primary destinations for both internal migrants from provinces such as Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, and cross-border migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Malawi. These migrants are drawn by employment and education opportunities but face long commutes, insecure housing, and exclusion from formal labour markets (Cross, 2006). Informal settlements such as Diepsloot and Dunoon exemplify this dynamic, offering shelter but limited security (Crush & Tawodzera, 2014).

Mobility itself remains marginal in planning thought. Migrants are often framed as temporary, weakening their claims to urban citizenship (Charlton & Kihato, 2006). This raises fundamental questions: whose presence is recognised as legitimate in the city, and whose mobility shapes urban futures?

Internal migration and informal settlements

Internal migration remains one of the most significant drivers of urban change in post-apartheid South Africa. Rural provinces such as Limpopo, the Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal continue to send large numbers of young people into metropolitan centres, drawn by the promise of employment, education, and access to services. Yet, for many, the city is not a site of upward mobility but of precarious survival. Recent statistics indicate that approximately 13.1% of South African households reside in informal dwellings, most of them concentrated on the urban periphery (Statistics South Africa, 2022).

Settlements such as Diepsloot in Johannesburg and Monwabisi Park in Cape Town illustrate the lived realities of internal migrants. These spaces are often framed in policy discourse as zones of deprivation, but ethnographic research reveals them as sites of social reproduction and collective negotiation. Migrants rely on kinship ties, informal land arrangements, and community leadership structures to secure housing and basic services (Huchzermeyer, 2011). Informal governance mechanisms—street committees, neighbourhood watch groups, and local associations—play a crucial role in mediating everyday life. However, these practices sit uneasily alongside state approaches that continue to treat informality as temporary, rather than recognising it as a durable feature of the urban landscape (Charlton, 2018).

Government responses have been shaped by the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP), introduced in 2004 under the Breaking New Ground framework. In principle, the UISP represented a shift away from relocation toward in-situ upgrading and participatory planning (Department of Human Settlements, 2004). Yet, implementation has often fallen short. Fiscal constraints, political pressures, and risk-averse bureaucratic cultures have led municipalities to revert to relocation-based solutions, presented as “upgrading” but in practice undermining established social networks (Tissington, 2012, p. 23).

Housing allocation mechanisms further disadvantage migrants. Subsidy systems typically prioritise long-term, formally registered urban residents, rendering recent arrivals invisible within official records. As Marx (2016) notes, this exclusion reinforces entrenched divisions between urban cores and peripheral areas, sustaining a dual-city dynamic in which migrant-driven informal settlements remain disconnected from formal economies and governance structures.

The persistence of informal settlements should therefore be understood not simply as a policy failure but as evidence of a deeper disconnect between official planning frameworks and the adaptive strategies of the urban poor. Migrants’ survival practices—incremental self-building, informal service sharing, and collective negotiation—demonstrate resilience and agency. Yet, without recognition in policy, these strategies remain precarious. Meaningful urban transformation requires sustained engagement with the lived experiences of internal migrants, treating them as legitimate participants in urban life rather than temporary occupants at the margins of the city.

Cross-border migration and xenophobia

The everyday realities of cross-border migrants on South Africa’s urban peripheries reveal a profound tension between constitutional ideals and lived experience. The post-apartheid Constitution extends basic rights and protections to “everyone” within the country’s borders, including access to housing,

healthcare, and due process. Yet, for migrants and asylum seekers from neighbouring states most notably Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, these legal guarantees have seldom translated into stable social or economic conditions (Crush et al., 2013).

Episodes of xenophobic violence underscore the precariousness of migrant life. The outbreaks in 2008 and again in 2015 resulted in deaths, displacement, and widespread destruction of livelihoods. Scholars argue these were not isolated eruptions but symptoms of deeper structural pressures: high unemployment, competition over scarce resources, and the failure of the state to manage local tensions (Neocosmos, 2010). Violence was concentrated in under-served areas such as Alexandra, Khayelitsha, and parts of eThekweni, where housing shortages and contested access to informal economic activities intensified everyday insecurity. In these contexts, migrants were frequently portrayed as economic competitors or illegitimate outsiders, irrespective of their length of residence or legal status (Misago, 2017).

Housing arrangements further entrench migrant marginalisation. Many foreign nationals reside in backyard shacks attached to RDP houses, overcrowded inner-city buildings, abandoned structures, or informal settlements on the urban fringe. These forms of accommodation place migrants beyond the reach of housing allocation mechanisms, social welfare systems, and municipal planning instruments such as Integrated Development Plans (Landau & Freemantle, 2010). Even migrants who have lived and worked in cities for extended periods often remain invisible in local development processes. Exclusion is reinforced by documentation requirements, fragmented migration governance at the municipal level, and limited political willingness to recognise migrants as legitimate members of urban communities (Palmary, 2009).

Civil society organisations-including the Scalabrini Centre, Lawyers for Human Rights, and the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA)-have sought to address these gaps by providing legal support, documentation assistance, and advocacy for migrant rights. While these interventions are critical, they cannot compensate for the absence of coherent state responses to migration at the urban scale. Local government engagement is often inconsistent and, at times, openly adversarial, shaped by political narratives that frame migration primarily as a security concern rather than as an issue of urban governance and development (Parnell & Pieterse, 2014).

The cumulative effect is a recurring cycle of displacement, exploitation, and social invisibility. Cross-border migrants remain vulnerable to eviction, rent extraction by landlords, harassment by law enforcement, exclusion from essential services, and periodic eruptions of anti-immigrant violence. In the absence of sustained efforts to incorporate migrants into housing policy, service provision, and participatory planning, post-apartheid urban transformation risks

entrenching a stratified form of urban citizenship in which non-nationals are confined to permanent marginality (Landau, 2014).

More broadly, the failure to integrate migration into urban policy undermines constitutional commitments to dignity and equality and threatens social cohesion in already fragile urban environments. A developmental approach to migration—one that foregrounds rights, participation, and inclusion—remains an urgent but largely unrealised dimension of South Africa’s pursuit of spatial justice and sustainable urban futures.

Housing, displacement, and peripheral inequality

Public housing delivery has been one of the most visible interventions in South Africa’s post-apartheid development project. Following the transition to democracy, the state invested heavily in large-scale housing programmes intended to address long-standing inequalities in access to land and adequate shelter. By 2020, more than four million subsidised housing units had been constructed, largely through the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and later policy iterations such as Breaking New Ground (BNG) (Department of Human Settlements, 2020). From a numerical standpoint, this represents a significant achievement. Yet scholars increasingly question whether these gains have translated into meaningful socio-spatial transformation (Harrison et al., 2008).

A recurring critique centres on the location of state-subsidised housing developments. While these projects provide formal dwellings, they are frequently situated on the outer margins of cities, far from employment hubs, well-resourced schools, healthcare facilities, and efficient public transport networks. This pattern has been described as the “suburbanisation of poverty,” whereby low-income households—many of them internal migrants or recent arrivals to the city—are placed in areas that offer shelter but few pathways to economic participation or social inclusion (Charlton & Kihato, 2006).

Housing megaprojects in Gauteng, including Lufhereng and Fleurhof, illustrate these challenges. Conceived as solutions to housing backlogs and informal settlement expansion, these developments have delivered large numbers of units. Yet their connection to the broader urban economy remains weak. Residents often face limited public transport options, long distances to employment centres, and insufficient social infrastructure such as clinics, schools, and recreational facilities (Ziblim & Fatti, 2019). For households without stable incomes or access to private transport, these conditions translate into high mobility costs, extended travel times, and constrained livelihood opportunities, reinforcing rather than alleviating urban poverty.

Concerns have also been raised about how housing is allocated. Persistent reports of corruption, opaque decision-making, and exclusionary criteria have

called into question the fairness of housing distribution processes (Lemanski, 2011). Migrants—both internal and cross-border—are often disadvantaged by documentation requirements, residency thresholds, and discretionary practices exercised by officials. Allocation systems tend to privilege “established” local residents, marginalising mobile populations and deepening inequalities within already peripheral spaces (Charlton, 2018).

These structural shortcomings have given rise to patterns of secondary displacement. In many instances, RDP beneficiaries particularly migrants leave their allocated houses and relocate back to informal settlements or backyard accommodation closer to employment opportunities and urban services (Marx, 2016). Some households informally sell or rent out their subsidised homes, despite policy restrictions, underscoring the gap between housing conceived as a fixed asset and housing understood as part of a broader livelihood strategy. Such practices reflect the mismatch between state planning assumptions of permanence and the flexible, mobility-driven survival strategies of low-income urban residents.

Overall, the limited recognition of migration and mobility within housing policy has produced outcomes that frequently undermine urban inclusion. Treating mobility as a problem to be controlled obscures its role as a defining feature of contemporary urban life in South Africa. Housing strategies that prioritise well-located development, flexibility, and responsiveness to the economic realities of migrant populations are essential if housing is to contribute to spatial justice rather than reproducing inherited patterns of inequality.

Access to services and infrastructure

Although South Africa’s Constitution enshrines a broad set of socio-economic rights—including access to adequate housing, clean water, sanitation, and electricity—the lived reality across many cities reveals persistent and deeply uneven patterns of service provision. Urban infrastructure continues to reflect historic spatial divisions, with affluent and historically white suburbs enjoying reliable, high-quality services, while informal settlements and townships—predominantly inhabited by Black, low-income, and migrant populations—remain systematically underserved (McDonald & Pape, 2002).

In many informal settlements and peripheral neighbourhoods, sanitation conditions remain especially dire. The continued use of the so-called “bucket system” in some areas stands in direct contradiction to constitutional guarantees of dignity, health, and a safe living environment. Access to basic services such as potable water, electricity, and refuse collection is often unreliable or entirely absent. Households may depend on shared communal taps, overcrowded pit latrines, or informal and unsafe electricity connections, exposing residents to heightened risks of illness, fire hazards, and environmental harm (Smith, 2019,

p. 118). These conditions not only threaten physical wellbeing but also reinforce broader patterns of social and economic marginalisation.

Local government planning and service delivery practices frequently deepen these inequalities. Research conducted in metropolitan areas such as Durban and Cape Town shows that municipal investment tends to prioritise formal residential areas, commercial districts, and middle-income developments, while informal settlements and peripheral communities receive limited attention or are excluded altogether (Bond & Dugard, 2008). Infrastructure improvements are often directed toward spaces deemed economically productive or politically strategic, leaving informal areas locked into cycles of neglect and infrastructural decay.

Service delivery reforms introduced under neoliberal cost-recovery frameworks have further intensified exclusion. The rollout of prepaid water and electricity meters, justified in policy terms as promoting efficiency and fiscal sustainability, has placed a disproportionate burden on low-income households. For poor and migrant residents, irregular incomes make it difficult to maintain consistent service access, resulting in frequent disconnections and limited mechanisms for appeal (von Schnitzler, 2008). In contrast to wealthier areas, where billing systems and service provision are relatively stable, peripheral communities are exposed to arbitrary enforcement and ongoing insecurity.

Migrants are among those most severely affected by these dynamics. Individuals lacking formal documentation, proof of residence, or stable employment often find themselves excluded from official service provision channels. Language barriers, limited awareness of legal rights, and institutional discrimination further restrict their ability to challenge exclusion, lodge complaints, or participate in local decision-making processes (Landau, 2006). The outcome is a form of infrastructural exclusion that mirrors older systems of racialised inequality, reproducing segregation through administrative and technical mechanisms rather than overt legal controls.

Fear also plays a significant role in shaping access to services. Undocumented migrants, in particular, may avoid asserting their rights due to concerns about eviction, deportation, or exposure to xenophobic violence. This anxiety is especially acute in informal settlements, where police raids and anti-immigrant attacks are recurrent threats (Crush et al., 2013). As a result, many migrants rely on precarious survival strategies—such as informal service sharing, overcrowded living arrangements or bribery—that further compromise safety and wellbeing.

Taken together, these conditions have turned many urban peripheries into spaces of infrastructural abandonment, where the promise of urban citizenship remains largely unrealised. Such patterns not only undermine the state's developmental objectives but also carry serious implications for public health, social cohesion, and long-term urban sustainability. Without a fundamental recalibration of

policy to address the structural barriers confronting low-income and migrant populations, service provision will continue to replicate the spatial inequalities inherited from apartheid rather than dismantle them.

Participatory governance and policy gaps

Post-apartheid local governance in South Africa is formally anchored in democratic principles that emphasise public participation and inclusive decision-making. Institutional mechanisms such as ward committees, community development forums, and the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) process were established to encourage grassroots involvement in municipal planning and to ensure that local priorities inform state action. The Municipal Systems Act (2000) legally obliges municipalities to facilitate public participation, reflecting a broader constitutional commitment to participatory democracy. Yet, despite this progressive framework, participation often remains procedural rather than substantive, functioning more as a formal requirement than a meaningful avenue for popular influence (Oldfield, 2008).

Studies of ward committees and IDP consultations reveal persistent shortcomings in how participation is practiced. These spaces are frequently characterised by low levels of engagement, limited transparency, and domination by political or social elites. Meetings are commonly scheduled at times or held in venues that exclude working-class residents, while consultation processes tend to privilege formally constituted organisations over informal or loosely organised groups (Cornwall, 2004). Consequently, residents of informal settlements and peripheral townships—those most directly affected by decisions on housing, infrastructure, and service delivery—are often absent from or marginalised within these forums.

Migrants are particularly disadvantaged within participatory governance structures. Cross-border migrants, especially those without regularised legal status, are effectively excluded altogether, while internal migrants frequently encounter barriers related to informal housing arrangements, lack of documentation, or exclusion from municipal records. This marginalisation is not simply an administrative oversight but reflects deeper structural assumptions about who qualifies as a legitimate urban subject. In practice, participatory governance often reproduces exclusionary patterns by recognising only those residents who fit into formal categories of permanence and tenure.

The result is a governance system that struggles to engage with the realities of mobility and informality. Migrants and residents of peripheral settlements remain invisible in planning processes, even though they are among the most affected by decisions regarding housing, infrastructure, and service delivery. This disconnect undermines the democratic promise of post-apartheid governance and perpetuates the invisibility of mobile populations.

For participatory governance to contribute meaningfully to urban transformation, it must move beyond procedural compliance and embrace substantive inclusion. This requires recognising migrants and informal residents as legitimate urban actors, adapting consultation mechanisms to their realities, and ensuring that grassroots voices shape policy outcomes. Without such recalibration, participatory structures risk reinforcing rather than dismantling inherited inequalities.

Discussion

Across the preceding sections, a recurring theme emerges: mobility is central to South Africa's urban life, yet it remains marginal in policy frameworks. Internal migrants and foreign nationals sustain informal economies, build social networks, and contribute to the vibrancy of peripheral settlements. However, their presence is often framed as temporary or illegitimate, weakening claims to urban citizenship and access to services (Charlton & Kihato, 2006).

State interventions whether in housing, service delivery, or participatory governance frequently reproduce inequality by privileging permanence and formal tenure. Subsidised housing projects, while numerically impressive, often relocate low-income households to distant peripheries, reinforcing the "suburbanisation of poverty" (Charlton & Kihato, 2006). Service delivery reforms, such as prepaid meters, disproportionately burden poor and migrant households (von Schnitzler, 2008). Participatory governance structures, though progressive in principle, exclude migrants and informal residents through procedural barriers (Oldfield, 2008).

Civil society organisations have attempted to fill these gaps, providing legal support, advocacy, and documentation assistance. Yet their efforts cannot substitute for coherent state engagement. Without integration of migration into urban policy, constitutional commitments to dignity and equality remain unrealised.

The discussion therefore points to a fundamental recalibration: urban transformation must embrace mobility as a defining feature of contemporary life. Planning frameworks should move beyond technocratic delivery to rights-based, participatory approaches that recognise migrants as legitimate urban actors. Only then can South Africa's cities begin to dismantle inherited inequalities and build inclusive futures.

Conclusion

Post-apartheid South Africa has made significant strides in housing delivery, infrastructure expansion, and participatory governance. Yet spatial justice remains elusive. Informal settlements and peripheral townships continue to absorb mobile populations, while policy frameworks neglect their adaptive

strategies. Cross-border migrants face xenophobia and exclusion, undermining constitutional ideals of dignity and equality.

To build inclusive cities, urban planning must embrace mobility as a defining feature of contemporary life. Participatory, rights-based frameworks that integrate migrants into housing, services, and governance are essential. Without sustained engagement with the lived realities of mobile populations, attempts to build more just and inclusive South African cities will remain fragmented and incomplete.

Previous dissemination

This work has not been previously published or presented at conferences. The manuscript is original and has been prepared specifically for journal publication.

Language statement

The manuscript has been written in English. The author has made every effort to ensure clarity and readability. The manuscript includes a full English abstract, a complete Portuguese resumo, and a Spanish resumen as required for Ibero American readership.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools

In compliance with the journal's ethical standards and transparency requirements, the author declares the following regarding the use of AI tools:

1. No AI tools were used for data collection, data analysis, literature synthesis, or any other research activity.
2. No generative AI tools (including but not limited to ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini, Copilot, or similar) were used to refine, correct, translate, format, or edit the manuscript text. The manuscript was written, revised, and formatted entirely by the author.

3. The entire work, from conceptualisation to final editing, was conducted independently by the human author. No AI based diagramming or design tools were used.
4. No bibliometric software (e.g., VOSviewer, CiteSpace) was used in this study, as the methodology is qualitative comparative case analysis and discourse analysis, not bibliometric analysis.

Declarations

Author contributions: The author contributed substantially to this study. The author had full access to all data and information used in the research. The author independently conceptualized and designed the study, conducted a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, and led the analysis and discussion. The author is solely responsible for the content of the final manuscript and has reviewed and approved it in its entirety.

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Consent to participate: Not applicable. The study did not involve the direct participation of human subjects; all analyzed data were publicly accessible or previously published.

Data availability: All data used in this study are derived from publicly available sources, including peer-reviewed journals, academic dissertations, government reports, and NGO publications, as detailed in the References section. No new datasets were generated or analyzed for this study.

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