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# Political Mobilisation as the Trigger of Xenophobic Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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What triggers xenophobic violence in South Africa? By answering this deceptively simple but critical question, this paper highlights an often-missed empirical factor and key element in the xenophobic violence causal chain: mobilization. Drawing from extensive, comparative empirical data and global literature, the paper argues that, while macro and micro-level socio-economic and political circumstances are important elements in heightening tensions and creating collective discontent, anger and resentment towards foreign nationals, it is the mobilization of this discontent and not the discontent itself that triggers xenophobic attacks in locations where they occur. Mobilization is the vital connective tissue between discontent and xenophobic violence. Local violence entrepreneurs use well-known mobilization techniques, including haranguing and parochial patronage, to stir crowds into targeted and well-organized violent attacks of foreign nationals in South Africa. While this argument is in line with existing theoretical approaches that emphasize mobilization as a key causal factor in the occurrence of collective violence, the paper provides useful solid empirical backing these still hesitant approaches require to consolidate their explanatory value and efficacy.

**Keywords:** xenophobic violence, collective violence, mobilization, collective discontent

Xenophobic violence has become a perennial feature in post-apartheid South Africa (Landau 2011). Indeed, since 1994, tens of thousands of people have been harassed, attacked, or killed because of their status as outsiders or foreign nationals (Misago 2016a). The African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) has a record of 482 verified xenophobic incidents from 1994 to October 2018, 25 of which took place between January and October 2018 (ACMS 2018). Xenophobic violence generally refers to any acts of collective violence (by local communities, groups or crowds) targeted at foreign nationals or “outsiders” because of their being foreign or strangers. It is an explicit targeting of foreign nationals or outsiders for violent attacks, regardless of any other material, political, cultural or social forces that might be at play (Dodson 2010). The main characteristics of this violence in South Africa include murder, assaults causing grievous bodily harm and burning, looting, robbery, arson, displacement, intimidation and threats (Misago 2017).

In response to the ongoing violence, academics, political leaders, migrant rights organisations and other analysts have sought to identify and explain its causal factors. Scholarly analysis has led to competing explanatory models mostly

emphasising broad and structural economic, political, historical and psychosocial factors. Economic explanations emphasise competition over scarce resources and opportunities between citizens and the increasing number of poor African migrants (Monson 2015). Political, historical and institutional explanations put forward the country’s past and current political and institutional configurations as the key drivers of the violence. The factors often cited here include the legacy of apartheid and the failure of post-apartheid nation-building efforts (Landau 2011). Psycho-social explanations emphasise cultural stereotyping resulting from the South Africans’ new direct contact with foreign Africans (Dodson 2010) and the culture of violence entrenched by the country’s history of militarism and historical trauma cultivated by the apartheid legacy (Lau, Seedat, and Suffla 2010). In addition to these broad structural factors, other analyses have added local socio-economic and political dynamics to the mix, arguing that the most proximate causes of the violence are found in the political economy and micro-politics localised in many of the country’s towns, townships and informal settlements (see for example Misago 2011; Nieftagodien 2011; Monson 2015).

While these explanations implicitly claim that the causal factors they put forward are necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of xenophobic violence, they “falter when faced with empirical or logical interrogation” (Landau 2011, 3). Indeed, while there can be no doubt that the drivers of xenophobic violence in South Africa are inevitably multiple and embedded in a complex interplay of the country’s past and present macro- and micro-level (political, social and economic) factors, the main weakness of these explanations lies in their inability to establish a direct empirical link between these certainly common and longstanding factors and the occurrence of violence in specific communities at specific times. These explanations fail to identify and clarify processes through which conditions and motives translate into or become expressed in collective violent attacks. In other words, they fail to identify the specific or real triggers of violence.

With the above in mind, and drawing on both global theoretical and empirical literature and extensive and comparative qualitative data from long-term research within South Africa, this paper aims to contribute to on-going efforts to provide a comprehensive empirically based and theoretically informed causal explanation of xenophobic violence in South Africa. It does so by asking and answering a deceptively simple but critical question: “what triggers xenophobic violence?” By answering this question, the paper highlights an often-missed empirical factor and key element in the xenophobic violence causal chain: mobilisation. It argues that, while macro- and micro-level socio-economic and political circumstances are important elements in heightening tensions and creating collective discontent, anger and resentment towards foreign nationals, it is the mobilisation of this discontent – and not the discontent itself – that triggers collective violent attacks. Mobilisation is the vital connective tissue between discontent and collective violence. As a trigger, mobilisation helps explain the pathways from collective discontent and/or instrumental motives to collective violent action.

This argument is in line with still hesitant theoretical approaches that emphasise mobilisation as a key causal factor in the occurrence of collective action/behaviour. Indeed, even though it is increasingly recognised as an important factor, the idea that mobilisation is the trigger of collective violence remains restricted to the level of conceptual and the-

oretical discussions and has not really been sufficiently tested with empirical research. These theoretical approaches still lack the solid empirical backing needed to consolidate their explanatory value or efficacy. By explaining how mobilisation processes trigger xenophobic violence in South Africa, this paper is hopefully a useful step in this regard.

For present purposes, mobilisation broadly refers to all activities, interactions and processes aimed at recruiting and persuading individuals and groups to participate in a collective action: the process of bringing potential participants into action. It focuses on the instigators of violence or “violence entrepreneurs” (Tilly 2003) and their ability to assemble individuals and persuade them to participate in a collective action for a seemingly common/collective goal even if, often or at least in the case of xenophobic violence in South Africa, the motives of instigators are not always the same as those of followers (Misago 2017). Mobilisation refers to the process through which violence entrepreneurs and followers “seal temporary loyalties around a violent enterprise” (Guichaoua 2013, 70).

## 1. Methodology

The paper draws heavily on extensive comparative qualitative empirical data collected by the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand since 2008, specifically data collected in sixteen locations across four South African provinces most affected by xenophobic violence (Gauteng, Western Cape, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal).

The aim of this on-going research is to explain the occurrence of xenophobic violence, as opposed to generalised and prevailing xenophobic sentiments. In other words, the research focus is not so much to explain xenophobic attitudes, in the sense of disliking or distrusting foreigners and other “outsiders” (Crush 2001) as to identify immediate triggers and conditions under which these sentiments are expressed in organised mass violence: why long-standing negative attitudes suddenly turn into violent attacks; why certain groups are targeted; and why violence breaks out in some areas and not in others. To achieve this goal, the study adopts the “most similar systems” approach, selecting research sites affected by violence and others that did not experience violence despite having similar socio-economic dynamics. The approach is informed by the conviction that “no enquiry into riots

should fail to account for their absence” (Horowitz 2001, xiv).

At each site, research teams (of which the author is team leader and project principal investigator) conduct in-depth, qualitative interviews with South African residents, foreign nationals residing in the same locations, relevant government officials, community leaders, and representatives of civil society organisations operating in the selected areas. In addition to individual in-depth interviews, the teams conduct an average of two focus group discussions at each research site. To date more than 760 participants have been interviewed in the scope of the study.

## 2. Perspectives on Mobilisation as a Key Determinant of Collective Violence

The concept of mobilisation as a key determinant of collective action emerged as a response to the shortcomings of the earlier *deprivation approach* that offered theoretical and empirical explanations emphasising underlying structural socio-economic and political issues as necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of collective violence. The central argument of this approach, also known as the *discontent model* (Snyder 1978) or “volcanic” model (Aya 1979), is that generalised real or perceived political, social or economic deprivation leads to collective discontent or mass anger that eventually erupts in collective violence (Aya 1979). Relevant theories include: i) *functionalism*, which explains collective violence in terms of purpose and motives rather than causes (Durkheim, in Coser 1967); ii) *realistic group conflict theory*, which posits that violent conflict between groups is rooted in a clash of competing group interests, be they economic, social or status-based (Brief et al. 2005; Sniderman, Hagerndorn, and Prior 2004); and iii) *relative deprivation theory*, which suggests that discontent arising from a perception of relative deprivation is the basic, instigating condition for collective violence (Gurr 1970; Snyder 1978; Horowitz 2001; Conteh-Morgan 2004; Fortman 2005).

Despite its popularity the deprivation model (and the theories it represents) has been heavily criticised on methodological and empirical grounds, particularly for failing to address important substantive questions concerning how discontented individuals come to undertake collective action. The model fails to explain either the links between individual

propensities and the occurrence of collective violent events or the passage from individual and collective discontent to collective violent action (Aya 1979), particularly given the non-conclusive evidence on attitude-behaviour consistency (Wicker 1969, cited in Snyder 1978; see also Kraus 1995).

These limitations led to the formulation of the mobilisation-based explanation which, according to its proponents (see for example Snyder 1978), is able to address questions that are logical necessities in explaining collective violence but underemphasised in most other theories or explanations: “how does collective violence occur?” (ibid.). Many scholars have argued that without showing exactly how prevailing structural (socio-economic and political) conditions lead to the occurrence of collective violence or action, explanations demonstrate only correlation rather than causality. For Hechter, Friedman, and Appelbaum (1982, 431) for example, these explanations have a hallowed place in the sociological literature but:

What has been missing is a simple explanation of their efficacy. Too frequently analysis has halted with the demonstration of correlations between measured variables and the actual occurrence of events and types of collective action. By providing a theory [or an explanation] that lays bare the elementary mechanisms of collective action we can begin to move beyond simple correlation towards the harder task of understanding [or establishing causality].

Informed mainly by the social movements literature, perspectives on the relevance of mobilisation in the occurrence of collective violence are most visible in theoretical discussions that emerged in the 1970s to oppose or complement earlier theoretical explanations (see for example Gamson 1975; Snyder 1978; Aya 1979). Indeed theories grouped in what I term “the mobilisation approach” (such as resource mobilisation, rational choice, elite manipulation) were developed partly as a response to growing dissatisfaction with the increasingly perceptible conceptual and empirical limitations of the then dominant “*deprivation-grievances-discontent*” theoretical approaches.

The core argument of the mobilisation approach to collective violence, also referred to as the *political model* (Aya 1979), is that it is the organisation or mobilisation of discontent that triggers collective violence rather than simply the discontent or grievances themselves. “Organizational variables are crucial in transforming the subjective states into collective events and [...] violence would not generally occur in situations which are comparable except for the absence of

such mechanisms” (Snyder 1978, 514). Recognising that there is always enough discontent in any society to enable extensive collective violent action, many scholars (for example Tilly 1975; Oberschall 1973; McCarthy and Zald 1977) have concluded that the mobilisation of discontent is a central explanatory variable for the occurrence of collective violence, particularly insofar as it helps to account for how individuals come to participate collectively in large-scale events (at the same time and place, and often for the same purpose) (see detailed discussion in Snyder 1978). Confirming the theoretical centrality of mobilisation and making discontent or grievances an important but weaker component, some analysts (for example McCarthy and Zald 1977; Smelser 1963) have gone even further to argue that grievances and discontent are often defined, created, and manipulated by violence entrepreneurs intent on benefiting from the collective hostility. For others, even genuine collective discontent and grievances need mobilisation to trigger a collective violence incident the same way dry grass needs a spark to ignite fire (Gleason 2011). Similarly, Bond (2007, 29) argues that “having a large number of distressed [or discontented] group members is not enough to foment collective violence. A group’s members must be marshaled, organized and focused” to be able to carry out a targeted collective action.

I share the opinion that a targeted collective action is not possible without mobilisation. An organiser, generally a leader with some kind of moral authority and legitimacy, makes the call that brings together individuals, members of a collectivity or just sympathisers and turns or converts them into actual participants. Referring to ethnic violence, Wolff (2007, cited in Vermeersch 2011, 1) reminds us that while this does not mean that the grievances invoked by such collective action are not deeply felt prior to the process of mobilisation, or that the population is not genuinely or spontaneously angered by “the ethnic other”, “the step from grievances to ethnic strife should never simply be regarded as an automatic linear chain from cause to consequence”. Grievance, anger, hatred and discontent require “political mobilization via association, formal or informal, to be galvanized into action” (Aya 1979, 49).

### 3. Mobilisation as a Trigger of Xenophobic Violence in South Africa

While scholars identify various techniques and processes involved in mobilisation for collective violence, they share the opinion that the success of mobilisation depends on the ability of the organiser(s), mobiliser(s) or leader(s) to develop a set of ideas that resonate with widely held beliefs (Gamson 1975). Organisers mobilise and convert affected group members and sympathisers into actual participants by casting a situation as a collective problem worthy of attention and by fostering a belief that the identified collective action or solution will effectively resolve the problem and overcome the perceived injustice (ibid.). By crystallising the belief in a collective problem and related corrective collective action, organisers are able to gain the both ideological and behavioural support needed to spur crowds into action (Smelser 1963). It is also important to note, as Bond (2007) argues, that mobilisation facilitating collective violence targets not only potential participants but all group and community members, to seek support for and solidarity with those who eventually perpetrate the actual violence. Popular support and approval facilitate mobilisation for the identified violent collective action by rationalising it as a loyal service to the group or community or necessary collective self-protection against malicious others intent on destroying the community and its way of life (ibid.).

In South Africa, instigators use different mobilisation techniques to trigger xenophobic violence in their respective communities. These include: “haranguing” and inciting crowds during mass community meetings, spreading purposely engineered rumours, appeals to the community’s sense of solidarity and right to self-defence, setting examples and asking community members to join, and even hiring groups of youths to carry out attacks. In the following, I describe and discuss examples of these processes and techniques drawn from primary data from different research sites. The discussion provides extensive empirical evidence that mobilisation is indeed the trigger of xenophobic attacks.

#### 3.1 Haranguing by Community Leaders in Mass Meetings

Analysis of events that immediately precede violence reveals that in most cases, violent attacks on foreign nationals are triggered by haranguing by community leaders during purposely called mass community meetings. Community

leaders (formal or informal) call mass community meetings in which attacks are decided upon and carefully organised. In those meetings, the leaders' role in triggering the violence is twofold: i) haranguing and stirring crowds into action, and ii) leading by example by directly participating in and commanding attacks. Examples from Alexandra, Diepsloot, Ramaphosa and Itireleng illustrate how this mobilisation technique triggered violent attacks on foreign nationals.

In Alexandra, a township in Johannesburg that has experienced multiple episodes of xenophobic violence since 1994, mobilising for the May 2008 violence against foreign nationals was the work of the "comrades" (a term commonly used for local community leaders). The comrades called a mass community meeting where the decision to attack and remove foreign nationals from the area was formally endorsed and after which attacks immediately started. One respondent summarised views shared by many:

The decision to remove foreigners was taken at a meeting held at the police station. Police then said "you as the community, what do you say when a person has come to your area and do whatever he wants, what do you do?" There was also a community leader who issued a statement that people must decide on how they deal with someone who has entered his kraal and taken his cattle. This statement for me started the violence. People agreed with community leaders that foreigners must leave. People said "from this very moment we are going to remove foreigners. We no longer want them here." Then attacks immediately started.

This account clearly indicates that attacks on foreign nationals in Alexandra were not a spontaneous outbreak, as reported in the media, but rather a result of deliberate community organising and mobilisation by local leaders (see also Monson and Arian 2011). There is no doubt about the defining role played by mobilisation in triggering the attacks. Mobilisation in this case involved the ability and active efforts of community leaders to bring people together in a mass meeting and incite them to action by convincing them that attacking and expelling "dangerous" foreigners was the only option available, and that they had the power to do so. The structure of the violence itself underlines the degree to which attacks were organised and carefully planned. As Monson and Arian (2011) indicate, despite the unavoidable chaos, a deliberate structure remained discernible in the evictions. For example, they cite one respondent stating that the expropriated homes were in at least some cases redistributed in an organised fashion:

Only people who did not have houses were selected to occupy these houses. If you said you did not have a house, you needed someone else to back your claim that you did not have a house. This is how houses were allocated. There were people who were collected from under bridges and they were given houses (ibid., 34).

In Diepsloot, another township in Johannesburg that has witnessed repeated xenophobic attacks, mobilisation for violence against foreign nationals occurred – as in Alexandra – in community meetings organised by the local leadership committee or the "comrades". In 2008 for example, the comrades called a mass community meeting and convinced local residents that attacking and removing foreigners from the areas was a "matter of survival". One respondent for example stated:

During the meeting, the comrades informed people that foreigners mug people going to work in the morning, kill them and put them inside the dirty bins and for that reason the committee and people were saying they no longer want any foreigners. Attacks that took place in Diepsloot were common when looking at other areas. But in Diepsloot it was an issue of survival, foreigners were killing us.

Attacks immediately followed that meeting. "They started attacking after the meeting on the same day. They started attacking at our house because it is known that Shonas [Zimbabweans] stay here," said one foreign national and victim of the violence. To make sure that all foreigners were found, the comrades directly leading the attacks asked all residents staying with foreigners to supply the relevant information. Asked how people knew that a person was not a South Africa citizen, one respondent stated: "The committee told the community that if you are staying with a foreigner you must tell them so that they can deal with them." Respondents were unanimous that the comrades led the attacks. One of them for example responded when asked who the people leading the attacks were: "It was the comrades and the community joined in since it was something discussed at the meeting and led by the comrades."

Mobilisation played a critical role in triggering the violence in Diepsloot. Without the comrades calling the community meeting and persuading people that attacking and expelling foreigners was a legitimate, urgent need, a "matter of survival", attacks would probably not have taken place. It is also important to note that in addition to rhetorically inciting action, the comrades also mobilised participants by setting an example, by directly leading and participating in the violence.

The processes that led to the 2008 xenophobic violence in Ramaphosa, a township in Ekurhuleni municipality, similarly confirm the direct triggering effect of mobilisation. Indeed all respondents reported that attacks on foreign nationals started directly after community leaders (the local ward committee) called a public meeting and urged community members to attack and expel foreigners in the name of self-defence. Asked how violence started, one respondent who participated in the attacks stated: "It was a normal community meeting called by our leaders. It was said we must attack Amashangane [foreigners] because they are fighting us. We must go and fight them also. We went to them straight and war broke out. We killed some and others ran away." One ward committee member (a community leader) confirmed that the committee called a meeting and urged for retaliation and self-defence against foreigners supposedly killing locals. In his own words:

On Friday, they [foreigners] started beating locals; they killed one person. On Saturday evening the killers who had disappeared came back to continue their job; they were beating up locals because they were beaten in Alex. On Sunday morning we tried to defend ourselves; we came together to decide to chase them away because they were killing us. [...] what happened? We beat them; we were not going to talk to them nicely; we went where they were gathered; we went to their shacks and burnt them.

According to some respondents, however, the story of foreigners beating and killing locals was just a rumour. The local ward councillor for instance was not aware of any killings of South Africans by foreigners. He stated when asked about it: "It is the first time we hear this. I think the self-defence story was fed to the community by the ring-leaders we are unfortunately not able to identify." It appears that mass violent attacks on foreign nationals in Ramaphosa were triggered and made possible by the mobilisation (by local leaders) of collective discontent caused by a rumour that crystallised and confirmed the belief that the presence of foreigners represented an eminent danger to the lives and livelihoods of all local community members.

The mobilisation processes that triggered violence against foreigners in Itireleng, an informal settlement in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, resemble those described in the previous cases. Respondents reported that attacks immediately followed a mass community meeting called by comrades in the night of 17 February 2008. Respondents were unanimous that it was in this meeting that the final decision

to attack and drive foreigners out was taken. At the meeting, community members agreed to the chairperson's proposal to remove foreigners because of all the problems they purportedly caused in the community. Judging from how respondents described the meeting, it is clear that the comrades had already decided to expel foreigners and the meeting was called to seek community approval and active participation. Asked how violence started, one respondent stated:

One evening a loud speaker by comrades from the gate called a meeting. A regular community meeting to discuss community problems. The chairperson opened the meeting by telling the crowds that there is only one issue on the agenda, that of foreigners. The chairperson asked the meeting if it wasn't a good idea if foreigners left the area. The entire meeting answered "Yeeees, foreigners must leave!" The later part of the meeting was discussing complaints about foreigners. The decision for them to be removed was taken by the chairperson very early in the meeting.

Led by the comrades, attacks on foreign nationals started immediately after that meeting. "From there and there people wasted no time; they moved from the meeting straight to houses where they knew foreigners were living and took them out," one respondent stated. Clearly, this discussion demonstrates the defining role mobilisation by community leaders played in triggering attacks on foreign nationals in the area – and securing mass participation. Again, through rhetorical means (haranguing and spreading rumours about the danger the presence of foreigners purportedly presents to the community), and by leading by example, the comrades incited the crowds and stirred them into action.

Beyond the South African context, haranguing and other forms of rhetorical mobilisation (such as face-to-face interactions with potential participants, dialogues with group members, mass media, etc.) are well-known and effective techniques used to mobilise community members into collective violent action (Guichaoua 2013; Smelser 1963). In particular, many scholars (for example Smelser 1963; Horowitz 2001; Das 2007) have documented the power of rumours in many different contexts. Rumours create a sense of endangered collectivity, which becomes easily mobilisable for collective action usually in the name of self-defence (Horowitz 2001). Through different forms of interaction, violence entrepreneurs spread rumours narratives or discourses that "tailor 'master cleavages', breeding readiness to violence among followers ..." (Guichaoua 2013, 73; see also Das 2007 and Horowitz 2001). Like in the Ramaphosa example above, such discourses and rumours foster enmity and fear,

polarise identities and “make the physical elimination of the vilified, and often dehumanised, enemy a feasible option in their followers’ eyes” (Guichaoua 2010, 9). A group’s members are easily mobilised to support and participate in collective violence by these polarising discourses, which become legitimisation processes that deem the targeted group and its members as dangerous, immoral, or sub-human, and hence killable (Bond 2007).

### 3.2 Patronage in Masiphumelele and Mamelodi

Masiphumelele township in Cape Town experienced two waves of violent attacks on foreign nationals (in 2006 and 2008). Respondents unanimously indicated that both waves were perpetrated by groups of youths “hired” by local business owners unhappy about the competition created by the increasing number of foreign-owned businesses. On both occasions, local business-owners organised internal meetings in which they decided to mobilise local youths to attack and chase away foreign nationals, particularly those operating businesses in the location. Talking about the 2006 violence, one respondent stated: “What they [local business owners] did, they spoke to these silly boys whom we refer to as thugs in the area to go and loot and vandalise Somali shops. That’s how the 2006 violence started.”

In 2008, local business owners similarly organised a meeting at a local community hall after which attacks began. As one respondent stated: “There was a meeting organised by business people, they used young people to attack the foreigners.” A former community leader confirmed: “A meeting was called by business people; they called the community and other business people. They were not happy that foreigners’ prices are cheap; they are friendly to their customers and give good service. They organised boys in the community hall to attack and loot the Somalis shops.” All respondents were well aware that local business people were behind the violence even if they were not directly involved in the attacks. As one stated: “Yes, it is not business people who loot the Baraka [foreigners] shops. What they do, which is important is that they ‘buy’ the youth to loot the shops of Baraka and evict them. They target unemployed youth to do this on their behalf.”

Patronage was also at play in Mamelodi, a township in Tshwane that experienced xenophobic violence in 2008, 2014, 2015 and 2017. In 2017, violence against foreign

nationals broke out in Mamelodi and other parts of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality following a call made by Mamelodi Concerned Residents for a march against the presence of foreign nationals in the country. Respondents indicated that the violence in 2015 was organised and led by the Phomolong Residents Association (an informal community leadership group).

While the Phomolong Residents Association did not openly admit to being behind the attacks on foreign shops, interviews strongly indicated their involvement. Indeed, Association representatives admitted they organised violent “service delivery protests” that led to attacks on foreign-owned businesses. One stated: “We need the protesters to make our point, but when they are hungry they go and get food from foreign shops to eat or take home to cook; and if shops here are closed they go to shops in other locations.”

In sum, local business owners and leaders triggered violent attacks on foreign nationals in Masiphumelele and Mamelodi using what Guichaoua (2013) terms “*parochial patronage*”, a well documented mobilisation technique involving hiring thugs or “area boys” to carry out the defined act of violence and offering participants material rewards in the form of money or tacit authorisation to loot.

In sum, the discussion above indicates that it is mobilisation that triggers mass violent attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa. We also learn from this discussion that community leaders and/or local violence entrepreneurs use well-known mobilisation techniques and processes to stir crowds into targeted and well-organised collective violent acts. The role of mobilisation in triggering xenophobic violence is even more obvious when one examines the reasons why such violence did not occur in potentially volatile locations (for example Madelakufa 1 and Setswetla) that are geographically close and socio-economically similar to violence-affected areas (see the most similar systems approach in the methodology section). Indeed, as I argue elsewhere (Misago 2016b), it is the absence of successful mobilisation that explains the absence of violence in those locations. By thwarting internal and external mobilisation attempts, community leaders and the local authorities (including the police) were able to prevent violence in those locations (*ibid.*).

The analytical understanding of mobilisation and its effect triggering collective violence is not only missing in the literature on xenophobic violence in South Africa but it is also



given insufficient consideration in the general literature and empirical research on collective violence. The real processes that trigger an act of collective violence do not seem to have attracted sufficient attention in research on determinants or key elements of the collective violence causal chain. This gap in the empirical literature can perhaps be attributed to the still widely held assumption that grievances accumulate and tensions or collective discontent boil up and automatically explode into collective violence. Much attention is paid to underlying conditions without explaining how they translate into collective violence. This assumption unfortunately persists despite regular reminders that violence is not an automatic outgrowth of conflict (Brubaker and Latin 1998) and that, as mentioned earlier, even “dry grass” needs a “spark” to ignite fire (Gleason 2011).

Even though it is increasingly recognised as an important factor, the discussion of mobilisation as trigger of collective violence remains conceptual and theoretical (as briefly discussed earlier) and has not really been thoroughly tested with empirical research (Guichaoua 2013 is an exception in this regard). The focus of theoretical positions emphasising the critical role mobilisation plays in the occurrence of collective violence seems to have been on debunking the merits of competing theoretical approaches rather than building solid methodological and analytical tools to adequately identify and understand its (mobilisation) forms, variables, processes and relevance. While these theoretical premises thus far make logical sense (in my opinion at least), they still lack solid and sufficient empirical backing that would consolidate their explanatory value or efficacy. Snyder (1978), one of the proponents of the mobilisation approach to collective violence admits that processes of interaction between individuals and groups, especially the mechanisms of recruiting potential participants, converting them into actual participants and maintaining their commitment remain important research questions. By explaining how mobilisation processes trigger xenophobic violence in South Africa, this paper is hopefully a useful contribution towards filling this gap.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper adds a new and critical element or key determinant to the analysis and understanding of the causal factors of xenophobic violence in South Africa, and highlights the often-missed but crucial triggering role played by mobilisation.

It argues that xenophobic violence in South Africa is triggered by mobilisation of collective discontent invariably generated by a wide range of different factors (such as relative deprivation, beliefs, rumours, etc.). It is important to note that mobilisation explains the pathways from collective discontent to collective (xenophobic) violence but not the origins of that discontent.

This addition is theoretically important and practically useful. Theoretically, it supports the still hesitant premise that it is the mobilisation of discontent – and not the discontent itself – that triggers acts of collective violence. Practically, this addition is useful as a significant step towards a clear understanding of all key determinants of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Such an understanding is necessary for relevant institutions to design appropriate measures/responses to stop on-going violence and/or prevent future recurrences.

While I believe that the case of xenophobic violence in South Africa provides important preliminary support for my argument, and hopefully a useful empirical entry into the role of mobilisation in triggering similar types of collective violence, further investigation and specifically more comparative research is needed to consolidate empirical evidence necessary for building the analytical tools that can help to adequately identify and better understand the forms, variables and processes of a successful mobilisation. Further, recognising that no single factor can adequately account for all determinants of collective violence, this paper acknowledges that mobilisation does not function in isolation. It requires interaction with other determinants to produce an act of targeted collective violence. The argument that collective violence is triggered by the mobilisation of collective discontent implies the indispensable presence of such discontent. To continue with Gleason’s analogy that “dry grass needs a spark to ignite fire” (2011) (discontent needs mobilisation to trigger collective violence), the inverse is equally true: “the spark needs dry grass to ignite fire” (or mobilisation needs discontent to trigger collective violence). I also argue elsewhere that mobilisation requires a favourable political opportunity structure to succeed in triggering xenophobic violence (Misago 2016b). I agree with Sen (2008) that approaches to explaining violence should avoid isolationist models because individual factors, no matter how important they are, cannot provide an adequate understanding of the causation of such a complex phenomenon in isolation from other societal con-

ditions and processes. As Sen argues, “A solitarist approach is, in general, a very efficient way of misunderstanding nearly everyone [or everything] in the world” (2008, 6).

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