

Declaration of Collective Voices

Background Note:

On 31 March 2023, a group of advocates, civil society representatives and human rights activists gathered at Wits University to further collective strategies to counter and prevent health xenophobia.

This Convening drafted this Declaration.

Organisations and individuals are invited to undersign and will thus formally join Collective Voices - please complete the details below

Following the Convening, the name of the Coalition was changed from Collective Voices against Health Xenophobia to Collective Voices for Health Access.

The Declaration reads as follows:

Collective Voices for Health Access

Health for everyone! No exclusion, no xenophobia!

31 March 2023 Declaration

During a national convening on 31 March 2023, delegates from civil society, health care sector and community-based organisations and activists resolved that a Coalition should be formed to campaign for an inclusive health system that delivers treatment to all, including migrant people^[1]. The Coalition will campaign to challenge all attempts to target and exclude migrant people from accessing healthcare as guaranteed under section 27 of the Constitution, the National Health Act, and other practices defined as health xenophobia and discrimination.

This document sets out the values and principles of such a Coalition called Collective Voices for Health Access (previously: Collective Voices against Health Xenophobia).

Bringing together individuals and organisations committed to the struggle for social justice in South Africa, the region and the continent, this gathering took place at a critical moment when our values and ethos as a country are being trampled on.

These values are based on the Constitution that is a blueprint to transform our country. It addresses the injustices of our colonial and apartheid past to a country

that respects the human rights of all who live in South Africa and respects the human dignity of every person irrespective of race, class, gender, sex, sexual orientation, disability or nationality and other forms of discrimination as set out in the equality clause of the Constitution.

Definition

Health xenophobia encompasses the provision of health services, the experiences of those who can or cannot access and receive services, and to restrictive legislation and policy as well as informal practices within health care facilities. Health xenophobia, therefore, can refer to patients being turned away from health facilities due to a lack of documentation or inability to pay (often unlawful) fees, to the harassment and abuse of foreign patients by healthcare staff including administrative staff and security, to policy amendments which reduce the rights of migrant people to access basic healthcare services. This includes denying migrant people health care, creating barriers to Universal Health Access or to providing sub-standard care. Health xenophobia can target internal and cross-border migrant people but practices generally focus on cross-border migrant people.

We recognise that acts of health xenophobia and other forms of health discrimination are part of a broader and structural problem in which the healthcare system is letting down so many people, no matter where they are from.

Context

Migrant people are often blamed for a South African public health system that is in crisis. They are targeted to divert attention from severe challenges facing the governance of public health. South Africa's health care system is buckling because of high levels of government corruption, crippling mismanagement, state capture, a divided health care system with limited health care options, historic underdevelopment, poor policy choices and implementation, and apathy over many years. There has been a freeze on posts, effectively meaning that no vacant posts in public hospitals and clinics are to be filled. Yet the xenophobic rhetoric from some sectors of government is to blame the crisis on the provision of services to a small minority of patients who were born outside South Africa's borders.

Migrant persons have experienced discrimination and prejudice in South Africa's health system for many years and have been turned away from services by public health institution employees. More recently, groups that explicitly mobilise around xenophobic hatred and anti-foreigner sentiment have physically prevented migrant peoples (or those that they view as being non-nationals based on appearance or language) from entering clinics and hospitals, and sometimes violently so.

This ultimately increases the burden on the health care system as those seeking treatment, which includes South African citizens, are turned away and placed at risk of falling sicker and thus needing higher levels of care, such as emergency care. It not only impacts negatively on individual health, but also on public health.

We believe that xenophobia endangers all who access healthcare, inhibits health-seeking and has a far-reaching impact on public and individual health.

The Way Forward

The organisations and individuals who make up Collective Voices endeavour to work together to:

- **Challenge and speak out** about health and human rights violations that migrant persons experience.
- **Sustain pressure on government** to ensure that Constitutional rights of access to health care services for all are respected in all laws, policies and facility-level directives including in National Health Insurance frameworks.
- **Demand accountability** and sanction of those who engage in and fuel health xenophobia.
- **Counter myths** and misinformation on migrant persons and health care.
- **Mobilise** on the local and national level to bolster social cohesion and foster solidarity and social justice.
- **Support evidence-based policies** and laws.
- Join campaigns to advocate for **affordable, quality health care for all who live in South Africa.**

- Promote, advance and **realise the right of everyone to access health care services**, including reproductive care, as protected by section 27 of the Constitution.