

**IMMIGRANT STREET TRADERS IN SOUTH AFRICA:
The economics, the struggle and the tensions.**

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ABSTRACT

'People say there is a struggle for resources going on between South Africans and foreigners', actually the struggle is long over. The foreigners have won hands down.'
(interviewee in Johannesburg, as quoted in Steinberg J. 2008, pg6)

Street trading has been successfully entrenched in urban cities in developing countries in Africa due to the attractiveness of 'convenience, affordability and personalized services from known vendors. Thus the proliferation of street trading in big urban cities cannot all be attributed to 'push factors' like ease of entry and unemployment but also to 'pull factors' like availability of buyers and personal relationships building. Thus, I conceptualize immigrant street trade as the meeting point of the immigrants' struggle for social and economic emancipation and the locals struggle for economic realization. From this meeting point, could develop social conflict, negotiations and adaptations that possibly will lead to communal cooperation or disintegration. In the case of South Africa, this has recently resulted in violent disintegration in form of xenophobic violence in 2008. Presently, the community of immigrant street traders and their host, have presumably returned to 'normal life' with veiled tensions.

Using lifestory methodology and supported with participant observation, I will seek to explore the nodal points of contacts between the immigrants and their host community based on their economic activity (street trade). My study will focus on the immigrants stories, roles and conceptions. I cannot access the local South Africans for this qualitative study due to language barriers and social tensions. However, I will draw from previous studies of local South Africans in townships and from personal observations. I will use the Nigerians and Congolese immigrant street traders as case study of the research.

INTRODUCTION

'People say there is a struggle for resources going on between South Africans and foreigners. Actually the struggle is long over. The foreigners have won hands down.' (A senior Johannesburg bureaucrat interviewee, as quoted in Steinberg. 2008, pg6)

This research will discuss the economic life of two immigrant groups in Cape Town, South Africa. My discussion originates from the current state of conflict fueled by xenophobic feelings, between immigrant street traders and local South Africans. Xenophobia is antithetical and detrimental to social cohesion and human right observation. It stands in the way of cooperation between peoples, nations and regions that are being pursued by both national and international governments, for economic developments (e.g. Southern Africa Development Community [SADC]). My research explores possibilities to promote social cohesion through street trading with focus on the interaction and interdependence between immigrant street traders and local South Africans.

The economic prowess of the immigrants has been discussed as contributing to the conflict. It has created feelings of threat and anger in the local South Africans, leading to social tensions that eventually resulted in violent conflict. More so, the South African public policies regarding immigrants have been criticized as being inadequate and ineffective (see Steinberg, 2005 and 2008; Hunter and Skinner, 2003; Palmary, 2002). Nevertheless, immigrant street traders have been plying their trade against the odds, until the violent xenophobic conflict in 2008¹. Today, most of the immigrant street traders have returned to their trade in the midst of veiled tensions.

To common knowledge, street traders make very meager income from their trade. They live below poverty level, work very hard and for many hours. Also, as immigrants in an

¹ Although South Africa has recorded several xenophobic violent acts against African immigrants, the violence of 2008 exacerbated over other registered ones. Between May 11th and 26th, some 62 foreign nationals were killed by violent mobs in the inner cities of South Africa. Cape Town was one of the cities heavily affected.

unfriendly and harsh socio-political migrant context, they have very limited access to state support. Yet the immigrants consider themselves ‘the winner of the struggle for resources’. Their image of a ‘winner’ strongly contradicts the commonly accepted and understood view of the street trader as ‘victims’ engaged in highly unprofitable economic activity. This highlights the view that the gloomy representation of immigrant street traders as urban underclass falls short of ‘what is really happening’ (see Rath, 2000).

This research will contribute to previous studies by conceptualizing street traders as ‘winners in the struggle for resources’. That is, as creative and resourceful actors, that actively engages their challenging context to achieve economic freedom. Previous studies on immigrant street traders have often emphasized the one sided social networks of the immigrants, that are appropriated for entrepreneurial gains. However, the growing success of immigrant businesses in advanced countries and their ties to the economy of such countries have suggested a relationship of interdependence (see Rath, 2000). Although situated at the lowest rung of the informal sector, this can also be applied to the street traders. Beyond the poverty and environmental hazard, at the heart of street trading, lie the interactions and transactions of social relationship.

To explore the dynamics of this process in the context of the study, the research will analyze immigrants’ street trade as means of facilitation (social relationship), generation (income), and consumption (local resources). It will adopt resilience theory as a guide to examine how immigrant street traders interact with their environment to overcome impediments to running their business. To explore its points, it will take street trade as the focal point of contact between the local community and authority. Thus, it will discuss and explore the activities and experience of the immigrants that relates to the establishment of the street trade and its continuous operations. It looks at each point of contact between the immigrants and their host, examining the strategies to deter or facilitate the start, death or continuity of the street trade.

The study will focus on two immigrant groups in the city of Cape Town, South Africa – the Congolese and Nigerians. It is necessary to adopt two different immigrant groups for

this study to de-emphasize ethnicity and highlight the **interactive dynamics** between **immigrants** and **host community**. However, ethnicity will be explored as a factor if found to be relevant (due to the South African context) in the course of data analysis. Furthermore, the immigrant groups selected represent members from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and outside the SADC. Thus if the data indicates regional affiliation as relevant, there will be opportunity for comparison of experience. The immigrant groups are selected for ease of accessibility and communication.

2. BACKGROUND

'People say there is a struggle for resources going on between South Africans and foreigners. Actually the struggle is long over. The foreigners have won hands down.' (A senior Johannesburg bureaucrat interviewee, as quoted in Steinberg. 2008, pg6)

Few days after the eruption of xenophobic violence in May, 2008, in South Africa, Jonny Steinberg² under the auspices of the Institute for Security Studies³ conducted a field study on the violence in some of the worst affected areas. This study (Steinberg, J., 2008) is quite relevant because it was done few days⁴ after the riots and most importantly it focused on the accounts and tales of the victims and the perpetrators. This gave a vivid representation of the voices of the victims and the perpetrators of the violence. Two crucial points that could be gleaned from the views of the interviewees are, firstly, that local South Africans believe that other African nationals (as foreigners) are grabbing South Africa's wealth and transferring it to their countries of origin. The emphasis here is to 'grab' and 'transfer'. This view is quite common and have earlier (before the xenophobic riots) been expressed by other South Africans in their response to the influx of immigrants into South Africa immediately after the apartheid era.

² Jonny Steinberg is a author and researcher that has written extensively on issues of criminal justice, security and other social issues challenging the new democratic and fragile nationhood of South Africa. He was educated in Wits (South Africa) and at Oxford University.

³ The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) is a leading African human security research institute based in South Africa. It pursues a vision of a stable and peaceful Africa through its activities. Detailed information about its activities can be found in www.iss.co.za.

⁴ The xenophobic riots occurred between 11th and 26th May, 2008. Steinberg conducted his field study between 1st and 10th June, 2008.

“if South Africans are going to compete for scarce resources with the millions of ‘aliens’ that are pouring into South Africa, then we can bid goodbye to our Reconstruction and Development Programme” (Minister of Home Affairs, 1994, as reported in Palmary, I. 2002, pg. 4).

The relevance of this view to this research is how the immigrant street traders experience it in their everyday life, with focus on how this is experienced in the entrepreneurial activities of the immigrant street traders.

The second critical point is that the immigrants consider themselves as winners over the barriers and adversities that inundated their operating environment. Their views imply a people that have confronted their adverse context by perseverance and tactics, and have reaped economic gains as their reward. Their story emphasizes an active interaction with the wider environment of their host. This evokes pictures of active and dynamic immigrant entrepreneurs in an adverse and unyielding context.

“To be selling fresh vegetables by seven in the morning, I must start making my way to the fresh produce market in City Deep at 3am. I can say that there is not a single South African awake at that time. The people on the street preparing for work are foreigners, every last one of them...” (an immigrant interviewee as reported in Steinberg J. 2008, pg. 7)

*“We arrived in this country without tools. At first we accepted any job... As we worked, so we saved. We bought tools. Business picked up. We charged more. As we gained success, so we bought television... and other nice things... From their point of view, what they saw was foreigners coming to do work they refused to do and then buying things they could not afford” (immigrant interviewee, *ibid.*)*

This image of the immigrant as a dynamic agent that engages its host community notwithstanding the forms of exclusion and persecution illustrates resilience. Importantly, how this dynamism is translated into daily action that is motivated by the will to survive. Furthermore, the image of the immigrant as a ‘self made’ ‘success’ may suggest that although the immigrants interact and engage with the environment, yet there is a lack of

interdependence or a perception of lack of interdependence. That is, the immigrant street trader does not perceive or acknowledge the contribution of their host society to their entrepreneurial gains. The understanding of how this perception is translated into the daily activities of the immigrant entrepreneur could be relevant for intervention policy targeting xenophobic feelings.

2.1 SOUTH AFRICA: In the shadow of apartheid

Although the apartheid regime in South Africa ended over ten years ago, the effects of its ills and wrongs continue to live on. Though care must be taken not to attribute every social ill or economic woes to the scourge of apartheid, yet, the reality as experienced in South Africa today cannot be divulged from the reign of apartheid in its history. In this sense, to understand South African's hatred and intolerance of immigrants (with special focus on other Africans), it is imperative to have a sound grasp of the apartheid regime. In this vein, but without going into details, it is important to highlight two important aspects of the apartheid regime.

Firstly, apartheid in South Africa was explicit and blatant. It was a system in which the state classified racial hierarchy that determines the permitted quality of life; with the blacks located at the lowest rung. Indeed, the South Africa apartheid government was the first capitalist state to systematically and openly structure inequality (see Crush and Pendleton, 2004; Seekings and Natrass, 2006). During these years of apartheid, South Africa was naturally not attractive as a migrant's destination, especially to other African nationals. Not only did the deplorable economic, social and political situation for blacks in South Africa acted as deterrent to other African migrants, but also, the apartheid government enforced strict controls over migrations in and out of South Africa. The effect was that, local South Africans did not have sustained social contacts with other Africa nationals during the difficult days of apartheid. Other Africa nationals were permitted into South Africa as contract workers and only permitted to remain in South Africa for short periods by the apartheid government. Thus Africa migrants visited South Africa, to work, reap financial gains and transfer the gains to their country of origin. So

this is the pattern that local South Africans can identify with other Africa migrants. Therefore, it is not surprising that the local South Africans do not have affinity with other Africans. The other African migrant economic activities cannot be related to the development of South Africa. So they cannot be permitted to reap the reward of post apartheid years when they were not in the midst of the struggle.

On the other hand, majority of other Africa countries participated in the fight against apartheid both at governmental as individual level. From personal experience, the struggle against apartheid at the micro (individual) level was quite active and pervasive in Nigeria. Local activists went around schools, markets, offices, churches etc, to speak against apartheid and solicit financial contributions from individuals to send to South Africa. Popular musicians sang about and against apartheid in South Africa, thus even children and the old were quite conversant with the struggle against apartheid and majority made financial contributions towards the end of apartheid (see Morris, 1998). The strongest and reoccurring theme in this external struggle against apartheid was unity. As we are all Africans, South Africans are our brothers and sisters, and what hurts other Africans (our brothers and sisters), surely is our pain. However, most probably and as is often the case, the local South Africans did not know about the local foreign ‘donors’ of the funds that were utilized as part of the resources for the struggle against apartheid. Therefore, while other Africans felt they were part of the positive developments in South Africa, and expected to be welcomed to South Africa with feelings of brotherliness, the local South Africans can only feel hostility, towards a people that were not around during their hard times, but have come to reap from the harvest.

Secondly, the goal and motive for the overthrow of apartheid, was anchored on the premise of an overthrow of inequality and the delivery of better living standards by the democratic black government. Thus in 1994, when the blacks led democratic government was sworn into office, it had a clear public commitment to correct the inequalities that had been entrenched in the apartheid system (see Seekings and Natrass, 2006). Also, the expectations of the local South Africans were clear; they wanted economic and social empowerment. Naturally, they expected the acquisition of political power by the blacks

to be the tool needed to achieve the goals of economic and social empowerment, especially through distribution and redistribution. This is a natural expectation because it was the usurping of political power by the white minority that was used to lock them in a state of economic and social penury. At the time of power handover in 1994, there was nothing to suggest contrary to the popular expectations and believes.

However, the present reality belies the expectations of local South Africans at the end of apartheid. Inequality and poverty is still rife within South Africa, the government has not been able to deliver all their promises. Several reasons have been given for this current state of affairs in South Africa, but relevant to this study, is the view that was discussed by Moeletsi Mbeki⁵. Based on the enthusiasm to fill the socio-economic gaps caused by apartheid and in part by the zeal to meet the expectations of South Africans, the black political elites took a bureaucratic and distributive path to nationhood rather than a developmental path. Thus the black government focused on redistributing the wealth of the country through welfare packages and other related socio-economic policies (e.g. Black Economic Empowerment [BEE] program). So rather than creating wealth, the government focused on consuming wealth through redistribution. While this had the advantage of meeting the immediate needs of the people, it had several drawbacks with debilitating effects on a globalizing economy.

Some of the drawbacks relevant for this study includes: increase in unemployment, due to poor job creation, development of partisan politics – that is, the ruling political party distributes the wealth of the country based on party loyalty, and the people also expect financial gratification and reward based on their party affiliation. This is an ill, Mbeki has often highlighted in his opposition of Thabo Mbeki, pointing out that “... major beneficiaries of large equity transfers are all individuals connected to the ANC... what is being traded is political influence” (see Steinberg J., 2008, pg. 10). One of the outcomes

⁵ Moeletsi Mbeki is the brother of Thabo Mbeki, the second post-apartheid president of South Africa (1999 – 2008). Moeletsi is a political economist and the deputy chairman of the South Africa Institute of International Affairs. He has written many articles about the political and economic situation in South Africa. (See ‘The Curse of South Africa’, in *New statesman*, 17 January, 2008; ‘A growing gap between the black elite and the masses? Elites and political and economic change in South Africa since the Anglo – Boer war’, in *Vrye Afrikaan*)

of the mentioned drawbacks is how it affects South Africans' perception of their state. Local South Africans perceive other Africans as usurpers of the resources of their state. Even amongst the local South Africans, there are constant struggles for state patronage. As Steinberg (ibid) observed, local South Africans perceive their economy as a static lump from which the politicians distribute wealth, each financial gains made by a foreigner, is a part of the lump lost to South Africans. This implies that the local South African lives with the fear of the foreigner stealing their resources until it is completely consumed without being distributed to all South Africans. Naturally, living in a state of poverty and unemployment in the context of a distributive government, this fear can influence violence and other actions to deter the foreigners from achieving economic viability.

However, the South African government has responded to tackle the level of poverty in the townships, through various forms of social welfare grants for the poor and unemployed. In this vein the right to social security was entrenched in the constitution (S27 (1) C) (see Haarmann, 2001). Examples of the social welfare grants include: Child Support Grant, Social Old Age Pension, Disability Grant, Care dependency grants. Also the Unemployment Insurance Fund theoretically covers all the unemployed poor. South Africa welfare transfers are based on means testing, making it theoretically probable that the transfers get to the poor (Pauw and Mncube, 2007). Nonetheless, the welfare intervention by the government has also been identified as part of the problem by the immigrant street traders. They have argued that because of the numerous grants that are provided by the government the South African poor are not motivated to engage in the hard work required by a thriving street trade business (see Morris, 1998; Steinberg, 2006).

2.2 MIGRATION TO SOUTH AFRICA: Xenophobia in the face of globalization

It is true that despite the numerous problems that face the majority of Blacks in South Africa, for Africans from other parts of the continent, the country is perceived as being the land of increased economic opportunities and hope, especially after the 1994 elections... Hence, as long as the widespread poverty and high levels of inequality prevail on the continent, South Africa will continue to attract migrants... (Maharaj, 2004. pg 2)

As have been explicitly put by Maharaj above, post-apartheid South Africa is highly attractive to other Africans from countries suffering from various forms of macro-economic deficiencies and violent conflicts. For the South African economy is one of the largest and richest in Africa. It is rich in natural and mineral resources and is mainly considered as reasonably industrialized (see Baden et al 1997). Thus South Africa has registered a huge influx of African migrants since the end of apartheid (see Crush and Williams, 2001), for economic reasons. Yet economic reasons alone does not account for the high influx of African immigrants into South Africa. Another reason that have pushed huge numbers of African immigrants into South Africa is the ravage of war in several countries in Africa, but especially in Southern and Eastern Africa Countries, for example, Zimbabwe, Congo, Uganda, etc. Technically, immigrants from war torn countries have refugee status, but are active in economic activities especially in the informal sector.

In order to deal with its influx of migrants, the South Africa government has made attempts to review and 'improve' its policy on immigration since the end of apartheid. To this end the government has been signatory to several declarations of the rights and treatment of immigrants, especially immigrants with refugee status. For example, in 1993 the South African government signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for safe passage of refugees into South Africa. Nevertheless, as previously stated, the immigration policy of South Africa has been strongly criticized as giving inadequate attention to the rights of refugees and other foreigners. For example, asylum seekers may not seek or take up employment pending the outcome of their application. While in reality, the processing of the application can take up to six months and above, yet the government does not provide for

the needs of the asylum seekers. Such inconsistencies in the immigration policy of South Africa still suggest the pursuit of 'restrictionist' policy to actively discourage migration. Also, the inconsistencies make implementation of the policy by local government and other government agencies challenging, giving room for corrupt and hostile practices against the asylum seekers. Notably, exclusionary and xenophobic attitudes are reported as specially focused on black African immigrants (see Crush and Williams, 2001; Peberdy and Rogerson, 2000; Palmary, 2002).

The immigration policy is critical to the survival and success of the immigrants' street trade in several ways. Firstly the type of residence permit will either allow or prevent an immigrant from starting an enterprise (in this case street trade). Secondly, due to the survivalist nature of street trading, the socio economic welfare of a street trader is related to the accessibility of economic infrastructure and support services to the immigrants. Although South Africa constitution allows that everyone (resident in South Africa) should be entitled to social security, the system excludes non-citizens (see Pauw and Mncube, 2007). Yet, it can be assumed that the absence of state support has facilitated the creativity and dexterity of the immigrants in surmounting the challenges and obstacles created by the exclusion. The actions and activities to surmount the challenges will require the immigrant street traders to contact, interact and negotiate with the local authorities to protect their interest and promote their business. Possibly, the same need to surmount those challenges, will also spur the street traders to contact, interact and negotiate with fellow street traders to appropriate the advantages of group action.

Nevertheless, high numbers of the African immigrants in South Africa are assumed to be illegal immigrants, thus not legally entitled to state support and resources. The assumptions are based on the knowledge that South Africa borders are highly porous and inefficiently controlled. Also, politicians are found of bandying very large figures of illegal immigrants in South Africa for political motives; like transferring the blame of unemployment, poverty and slow economic development to the presence of illegal immigrants. Thus the perception of very high number of illegal immigrants, combined

with the view that they are not contributing to the development of South Africa, fuels hostility and intolerance.

The high level of hostilities, intolerance and the pursuit of restrictive immigration contradicts South Africa other regional pursuit, for example, trade with other African nations. Regional cooperation like the SADC encourages and promotes economic relationship between nations under its agreements. There are South African companies that have taken advantage of such agreements to establish branches in other African countries. Although most of these companies are big corporations, yet their existence and successes in the other African countries are based on goodwill and legal agreements. Thus while South Africa is trying to improve its trade with other African nations, it is important that it deals with the hostilities and intolerance of African migrants amongst its people. One way to deal with the hostilities and intolerance is to promote social cohesion and highlight interdependence. In this vein, street trading is relevant because of the large number of immigrants that engage in it and its operations demands a high level of interaction between the immigrants and their host community.

This is commensurate with studies on entrepreneurship that has highlighted its dynamic form, especially as “a social and economic behavior in which people respond to environmental signals about the availability of opportunities and the resources with which they can be exploited” (see Rae and Carswell, 2000, pg 220). In the process of starting and sustaining a street trading business, the immigrant street trader is compelled to deal with the locals as customers of their business, as suppliers of their products, as employers, as competitors/business neighbors and as local authorities. In each of these contact points the immigrant street trader is engaged in some form of social and economic transaction and negotiation.

In this vein, as the immigrant street trader encounters and overcomes hardship in the form of obstacles or challenges to effectively run the street trading business, the trader is developing resilience strategies or appropriating already existing strategies. It is the relationship between these strategies and the welfare (social and economic) of the

immigrant that contributes to the conception of the immigrant self as a ‘winner’. Indeed, the capability to survive and possibly grow amidst their challenges, suggests creativity and innovativeness in the practice of the business. Within this context, street trading by the immigrants can be seen as means of social conduit between the immigrants and locals, which is being facilitated by the economic transactions of the trade. Social perception, feelings and messages are being formed, strengthened, countered and transmitted at each point of contact in the course of business activities. The effect of this conduit creates a form of interdependence between the immigrant street traders, the locals and local authorities.

3. THEORETICAL GUIDE

To the observer of the immigrant street trader the harshness of the trade, the meager products and the trickle of income leads to questions such as ‘how do they manage?’ and ‘why do they continue?’, ‘There can be no hope in this or can there?’. The life of hardship in a challenging context requires that the participants of that life make attempts to manage the challenges and strengthen their chance to survive. The attempt to manage the challenges could either be in the form of pre-planned strategies or unplanned actions. In this sense, the relationship between the participants and the context is highly dynamic and goal directed. With this background, in order to capture the dynamism and effects of the subject matter of this study, I have chosen to adopt resilience theory as a guide. In the same context it is my hope that the study will also contribute to the development of the resilience theory.

The theoretical construct of resilience denotes two important conditions: exposure to high risk or vulnerable situation and the ability to achieve success and adapt positively (see Luthar et al, 2000). However, the definition of each of the constructs has been the source of ongoing criticisms and growing concerns about its scientific value (see Kaplan, 1999; Luthar and Cushing, 1999; Tarter and Vanykov, 1999). One of the major criticisms is the contention that the resilience construct adds nothing significant to the more general term

of ‘positive adjustment’ thus inferring that it is not relevant to define resilience as a separate term (Tarter and Vanyukov, 1999; Kaplan, 1999; Tolan, 1996). However, studies have shown empirical evidence that systems may achieve resilience or positive adaptation through different ways. More so, the presence of adversity or vulnerability is not necessary for the system to achieve positive adaptation. These infer that resilience and positive adaptation can represent different constructs (see Luthar et al, 2000). Nevertheless, there has been criticism about the inconsistencies and ambiguity in the key constructs of resilience (see Cicchetti and Garmezy, 1993; Luthar and Cushing, 1999; Tarter and Vanyukov, 1999), prompting Luther et al to advice that in the absence of universally employed operationalization, researchers should state clearly the approach adopted for their study. Furthermore, it is also imperative that researchers indicate if their study conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic process or else as a psychological trait.

Although this research does not focus on studying ‘what is resilience’, but by utilizing the resilience theory as a guide, it creates the possibility of contributing to the ongoing discussion of the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘where’ of resilience. In this vein, resilience is conceptualized in this study as a dynamic process of interaction between the individual and its environment (see Masten et al, 1999, Ruttter, 1993). Also this study will depart from the theoretical definitions of pivotal terms in resilience theory by adopting a contextual definition given by participants in the study. That is, central terms such as ‘vulnerability’, ‘risk’, and ‘positive adaptation’ in the resilience construct will assume the meanings as experienced and defined by the participants in the context of the study. This approach will give the research the advantage of bypassing the ongoing argument about inconsistencies in the definition of the concepts (see Luthar and Cushing, 1999; Luthar et al, 2000). Also, this will ground the study in its context, creating the avenue for new dimensions and perspectives to emerge that will contribute to our understanding of resilience.

Furthermore the research will adopt the definition of resilience as “the ability of a system to remain functionally stable in the face of stress and to recover following a disturbance” (Redman and Kinzig, 2003. Pg.5). That is, theoretically emphasizing the flexibility and

adaptiveness of a system. This implies that the more flexible a system is, the better it can adapt, and the more resilient it becomes (Levin, 1999). Furthermore, a resilience approach implies an active system in all phases towards the goal of stability, emphasizing the dynamic nature of resilience, risk and vulnerability (see Luther, 1996; Masten, 1994). Thus a resilience approach affords the opportunity to study the socio-economic activities of the immigrant street traders both as a response to and a product of the challenging context, with focus on the dynamism of the actors in response to their wider environment. In this vein, this research hypothesizes that the immigrant street traders can take more active responsibility for social cohesion in the local community, than is traditionally expected. Also, that within the context of street trading, efforts towards cooperation and integration of the immigrant street traders should pursue the goals of flexibility and adaptation rather than control and structure that is more common with local authorities.

3.1 A RESILIENCE APPROACH

At the core of the resilience approach is the assumption that the immigrant street trader is being motivated by the pressing need for survival in a harsh and aggressive environment. That is, the environment is not passive but active in its actions and reactions to deter the entrepreneurial drive of the immigrant street trader. Thus the onus lies with the immigrant street trader to take actions to tackle the barriers and challenges and establish an optimal system of performance for their business. The pressing need for survival is compelled by the uncertainty, risk, and vulnerability traditionally associated with the role of a foreigner and a street trader. The reason for living as a foreigner is often equated with capitalist compulsions or constraints of violence and persecution from home (see Beck, 2004; Malcomson, 1998). This relates to the immigrant street trader in the South African context. As have been discussed above, African immigrants that populate street trading in South Africa are being pushed from home by either war and violence or economic hardship from their country of origin (see Steinberg, 2005; Morris, 1998). Thus in talking about their life story as immigrants and street trader in the South Africa context, the immigrant street traders will define their conception of risk, vulnerability and adaptation.

So, arriving in South Africa in a state of vulnerability and poverty, the immigrant relies on ties, skills or structural opportunities that can be leveraged for economic gains. In this sense, most studies have focused on the support of ethnic network as the social capital of the immigrant. That is, the immigrant is admitted into an existing network based on ethnic affiliations and thus, can appropriate existing benefits for material gains. However, to acquire entrepreneurship gains, the immigrant will need to develop ties with Georg Simmel's (1971) 'outsiders' or what is more recently conceptualized as 'bridge social capital' (see Woolcock and Narayan, 2000).

Furthermore, although a resilience theory assumes that a system is resilient when it absorbs high level of shock without losing its core, the social world is highly characterized by flexibility, relativity and dynamism, thus the core of resilience in a social dynamics will not be its regularity but how it changes its form to adapt to shocks. The response of the entrepreneurial activities of the immigrant street traders to the shock of the xenophobic violence of 2008 may give an interesting view of social resilience.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The research objective is to learn how immigrant street traders successfully operate their business, using point of contacts with locals as a platform of interaction and interdependence. It explores how street trade can be harnessed as a means of cooperation and integration, but could also instigate disintegration. To achieve cooperation and cohesion it is critical that the interdependence and interrelationship of the goals of all parties be emphasized and highlighted.

The research aims at providing answer to the following questions:

1. How do immigrants successfully operate street trading business in South Africa drawing from the wider environment of their host?

2. Did the xenophobic violence of 2008 have any effect on the entrepreneurial activities of the immigrant street traders

5. RESEARCH METHOD

This is a qualitative study with possibility for quantitative analysis at the end. It will utilize multi methods to achieve its objectives. Basically, a life-story approach (Atkinson, 1998; Roberts, 2002) will be followed for insights into how the different social changes (the peak being the xenophobic violent eruption) and experiences are interpreted and economically acted upon. This approach will give me the opportunity to explore in interpretive ways, the experiences and actions of the immigrant street traders as understood in the present settings. In this sense, semi structured in-depth interview will be conducted with selected participants. The aim is to prompt participants to reflect upon, and disclose their 'life story' from arrival to present day. The focus will be on their interaction and actions with South Africans as it relates to starting and sustaining their street trade.

Also, participant observation will support data from interviews and discussions. That is, the study will benefit from a mid to long term observation of the immigrants in their place of street trade and as they go about the daily business activities (for example, meeting with supplier or local government officials).

Furthermore, there is the need to support field data with a study of relevant Newspapers, articles and reports that discuss the views of local South Africans on the immigrant street traders. This method is necessary in order to get a representative view of the South Africans in the analysis of the data.

RESEARCH OUTPUT

At the end of my research, I expect to have produced three or four published articles.

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