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Open in Principle, Closed at the Paycheque: Namibian Attitudes Toward Migrant Workers on the Eve of the Resource Boom

Migration attitudes in Afrobarometer Round 10, on the eve of the resource boom

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Abstract

Namibia is entering a resource moment. Deep-water oil in the Orange Basin and a continental-scale green-hydrogen build-out will draw foreign labour into an economy with among the highest unemployment and inequality in the world, and they will do so as its largest neighbour, South Africa, turns decisively against migrants. This article asks how Namibians regard migrant workers, what drives those attitudes, and what they portend for a country on the cusp of a labour-importing boom. Drawing on Afrobarometer Round 10 (N = 1,200) with full survey weighting, and benchmarking Namibia against fifteen Southern African neighbours, it makes a central argument: opposition to migrant workers in Namibia is not the grievance of a threatened minority but a broad national consensus, largely unpatterned by class, education, employment, or region. Namibians endorse continental trade and regional free movement in the abstract, and they largely accept migrants as neighbours, yet roughly three-quarters want fewer or no foreign job seekers. Factor analysis shows this gap between principle and practice to be the coexistence of two empirically distinct dimensions, economic restrictionism and social tolerance. Across the region these dimensions scarcely correlate, and Namibia occupies a position, restrictive on labour but socially tolerant, that sets it apart from South Africa, which is hostile on both. Because the attitude is consensual rather than deprivation-driven, growth alone will not soften it; the burden falls instead on migration governance and the credibility of local-content policy. The findings expose the thin mass consent beneath Africa's elite-level integration commitments, and they carry a pointed historical irony for a nation forged in resistance to a coerced system of migrant contract labour.

1. Introduction

Within the coming decade Namibia expects to absorb foreign workers at a scale it has not previously known. The deep-water discoveries of the Orange Basin, chief among them TotalEnergies' Venus and the Mopane complex, together with the multi-billion-dollar Hyphen green-hydrogen project at Tsau //Khaeb, and several new mining projects, will generate concentrated demand for skilled and semi-skilled labour that the domestic workforce, on the government's own assessment, cannot immediately supply. This demand-side pull arrives alongside a policy-side one. The African Continental Free Trade Area, and behind it, the African Union's stalled Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, envisage a continent across which workers move more freely. And it arrives, finally, against a cautionary backdrop next door. In South Africa, Operation Dudula has converted diffuse anti-migrant sentiment into organised exclusion: vigilante document checks, clinic and school blockades, and a state deportation drive that the courts have only partly restrained.

These three developments converge on a single question. How will Namibians receive migrant workers? The question matters because the friction points of a resource boom are distributive; they turn on who fills the jobs the boom creates. It matters, too, because the Southern African experience shows how quickly economic anxiety can be organised into exclusionary politics. Yet it has not been studied. Namibia is largely absent from the comparative literature on African migration attitudes, and the one dedicated survey of Namibian opinion predates both the SADC integration debates and the resource moment entirely (Frayne and Pendleton, 2002). The lacuna is the more striking because Namibia's own history is, in large measure, a history of migrant labour. The contract system that funnelled workers from the northern reserves to the mines, farms, and fisheries of the settler-controlled "Police Zone" was central both to the colonial economy and to the liberation struggle that ended it. A country whose nationhood was forged partly in resistance to the coerced movement of labour now confronts the question of how to receive labour that moves freely.

This article fills the empirical gap using Afrobarometer Round 10, fielded in Namibia in early 2024, which carried an unusually complete migration module. Its central finding, and its principal contribution, is that opposition to migrant workers in Namibia is a consensus rather than a grievance. Three-quarters of Namibians want fewer or no foreign job seekers, and, crucially, that restrictionism does not track the lines along which the immigration-attitudes literature has taught us to expect it. It is not concentrated among the unemployed, the poor, the less educated, or those in border regions. It is spread, remarkably evenly, across the population. Around this central claim the article develops three further results. First, it documents a pronounced principle–practice gap: Namibians are open in the abstract, to trade, to regional free movement, and to migrants as neighbours, but strongly protectionist the moment the question turns to foreign workers competing for jobs. Second, it shows through factor analysis that this is not a contradiction within a single attitude but the coexistence of two distinct dimensions, economic restrictionism and social tolerance, that behave and are driven differently. Third, benchmarking Namibia against fifteen

SADC neighbours, it shows that the country occupies a different attitudinal position from South Africa: restrictive on labour, but socially tolerant, where South Africa is hostile on both.

Taken together, these results reframe what the resource moment demands of policy. If opposition to migrant labour were the grievance of the economically marginal, a boom that raised incomes and created jobs might dissolve it. Because it is instead a broad and consensual disposition, growth alone will not, and the weight falls on the credibility of local-content policy and the visible Namibianisation of the workforce. Those are precisely the instruments the Namibian state has begun, tentatively, to reach for. The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the four contexts within which Namibian attitudes toward migrant workers are formed: the country's history of migrant contract labour, the resource moment and the local-content response, the continental project of labour mobility, and the South African shadow. Section 3 develops the theoretical expectations. Section 4 describes the data and methods. Section 5 presents the structure of attitudes, the gradient, the two dimensions, and the regional placement. Section 6 turns to drivers and to an attitudinal typology, establishing the consensus finding. Section 7 discusses what the findings imply for Namibia's future and for the comparison with South Africa, and Section 8 concludes.

2. Four contexts

2.1 A nation made by migrant labour

To understand contemporary Namibian attitudes toward migrant workers, one must begin with a plain fact. The modern Namibian economy and polity were built upon migrant labour of a particularly coercive kind. From 1943 the South West African Native Labour Association (SWANLA) operated a quasi-governmental monopoly over the recruitment and allocation of African labour, channelling workers, overwhelmingly from the densely populated northern reserves of Ovamboland and Kavango, southward into the mines, commercial farms, and fishing industry of the settler-controlled "Police Zone" (Bauer, 2013). The system was migration stripped of any freedom. Workers signed contracts of twelve to eighteen months at fixed wages with no bargaining power; they carried passes that strictly monitored their movement; they were housed in employer-controlled compounds, forbidden to bring wives or families, and faced criminal rather than civil sanction for breach of contract. Minimum monthly wages in the early 1970s ranged from roughly R3.75 to R8.75. The contract worker, separated from land and family and rotated through the settler economy, was the central figure of the colonial labour order.

That order was also the crucible of the nationalist movement. The contract system's grievances were among the founding concerns of the Ovamboland People's Organisation and its successor, SWAPO, and the 1971–72 contract workers' strike was a watershed in the independence struggle. It began in Windhoek on 13 December 1971, spread to Walvis Bay and the mines, and drew in an estimated 25,000 workers, more than half of the roughly 43,400 contract workers then in the Police Zone. Expelled pro-independence students, who had taken contract work precisely in order to organise, gave it direction; the International Court of Justice's June 1971 ruling that South

Africa's occupation of the territory was illegal gave it courage. The strike produced a January 1972 agreement that abolished SWANLA, required written employment contracts, and replaced criminal with civil sanctions, even if, in practice, little changed for the workers themselves. It then flowed into the broader liberation war. Namibia's independence, in this sense, was won in part against a system of exploited migrant labour.

This history matters for the present study in two ways. Analytically, it means that "migrant labour" is not, for Namibians, a neutral or novel category. It is one freighted with memory, for the movement of workers across boundaries for the benefit of others is woven into the national story. Substantively, it sets up the irony that frames this article. A nation that defined itself in opposition to the coerced importation of labour now debates how to receive labour that arrives freely, drawn by a resource boom, and, as the evidence below shows, it does so with considerable reluctance. The post-independence continuity of precarious labour arrangements, including the labour-hire system that persisted until its contestation in the 2000s, only sharpens the point (Bauer, 2013).

2.2 The resource moment

Since 2022 the Orange Basin off Namibia's southern coast has become one of the world's most closely watched deep-water oil frontiers. TotalEnergies' Venus discovery is estimated to hold on the order of 750 million barrels, with a final investment decision anticipated and first oil targeted around 2030; the neighbouring Mopane complex has been assessed at well over a billion barrels of oil equivalent on optimistic estimates. The exuberance is real, but it is not unqualified. Shell's write-down of its Graff discovery, of some US\$400 million, is a reminder that deep-water appraisal is unforgiving and that not every discovery becomes a field. In parallel, and in some respects further advanced politically, the Hyphen Hydrogen Energy project in the Tsau //Khaeb (Sperrgebiet) national park proposes a capital commitment exceeding US\$10 billion to produce green hydrogen and ammonia at scale. It promises on the order of 15,000 jobs during construction and 3,000 permanent positions, with an official aspiration that a large majority go to Namibians (Hyphen Hydrogen Energy, 2024).

These projects land in a labour market under severe stress. On the Namibia Statistics Agency's 2023 Labour Force Survey, strict unemployment stands at 36.9 per cent and the broad measure at 54.8 per cent; youth joblessness approaches half; and more than half of those in work earn under N\$5,000 a month (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2025). Namibia's Gini coefficient, at roughly 0.59, is among the highest recorded anywhere (World Bank, 2022). Against this backdrop the government of President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, who took office in March 2025 as Namibia's first woman head of state, has made job creation the centrepiece of its economic programme. The sixth National Development Plan frames an objective of 500,000 jobs over five years, and a high-level public-private platform was convened to unlock private investment against that target. The Chamber of Mines, for its part, has advertised a large-scale mining pipeline of some US\$2.865 billion in investment and more than 18,000 jobs over five years, but it conditioned the promise explicitly on the resolution of bottlenecks, "skills availability" prominent among them (Chamber of Mines of Namibia, 2025).

The resource moment, in short, does not raise migration as an abstraction. It converts it into a concrete distributive question, who fills the jobs the boom creates, and it does so at the very moment when the domestic supply of the relevant skills is demonstrably thin and when the state has staked its political credibility on employment. This is the terrain on which attitudes toward migrant workers acquire their charge.

2.3 Local content, Namibianisation, and the skills gap

The Namibian state's answer to that distributive question is local content. The National Upstream Petroleum Local Content Policy, finalised in draft in March 2025, places "Namibianisation" at its centre, meaning the progressive substitution of Namibian workers, firms, and ownership for foreign ones across the petroleum value chain (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2025). Operators must submit a Local Content Plan as a condition of licensing. The plan contains a dedicated Human Resources section that makes the recruitment, training, and development of Namibians a mandatory and monitored obligation, and performance is tracked through indicators that include the percentage of Namibians employed, with the Ministry of Mines and Energy as regulator and instruments such as the Petroleum Training and Education Fund to finance skills development. Equity thresholds, requiring local ownership of at least 51 per cent in specified activities, extend the same logic to capital.

The difficulty, which the policy documents themselves acknowledge, is that the skills to be "Namibianised" do not yet exist in sufficient supply. A 2025 consolidated assessment of technical and vocational education for renewable energy and green hydrogen, produced with the Namibia Training Authority, identifies pervasive skills gaps across the critical domains of the hydrogen economy, an outdated training-equipment base, and a trainer corps with little exposure to the relevant technologies (GIZ, 2025). Sectoral analyses are blunter still. The key occupations of the renewables build-out, such as hydrogen safety specialists, fuel-cell engineers, and high-specification welders, are precisely those "underrepresented in terms of skills in Namibia," and, in the words of one policy review, "foreign experts are expected to dominate senior positions" in the early phases of these projects (Shefeni, 2024; Renewables Policy and Practice, 2024). A 2024 industrial baseline survey of the upstream oil and gas sector reached a complementary conclusion from the supply side. The existing Namibian supplier base is overwhelmingly locally owned and locally staffed, but it is composed of small and medium firms not yet operating at the scale or to the standards the industry demands, so that realising local content will require substantial capacity-building and time (Deloitte, 2024). Even the headline job projections have drawn scepticism as "unrealistic." The result is a structural tension the state cannot easily resolve: local-content policy promises Namibianisation, but the boom's early years will necessarily rely on imported expertise. Local content is thus at once an economic instrument and a political one, a promise that the boom's jobs will be Namibian, made to a public that, as this article shows, is deeply attached to exactly that promise.

2.4 Continental labour mobility and the consent problem

Namibia's boom unfolds within a continental project of integration whose labour dimension has conspicuously stalled. African governments have embraced trade integration, and the AfCFTA has been ratified by well over thirty states, while the companion 2018 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons languishes at four ratifications, far short of the fifteen required to enter into force (Bisong, 2022; UNECA, 2023). The explanations offered in the literature are elite-level. Wealthier and larger states fear domestic backlash and guard their sovereignty (Hirsch, 2021; Nwafor et al., 2024). Within SADC, integration is deliberately modest, since the 2005 Protocol offers "facilitation" of movement rather than free movement, and Namibia's own 2020 National Labour Migration Policy foregrounds the protection of local workers and the managed admission of migrants (Dodson and Crush, 2015; IOM, 2020).

What this literature underplays is the mass foundation of integration. Free movement is negotiated at summits, in the name of publics whose own views on admitting foreign workers are seldom examined (Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Patel, 2021). Namibia is a sharp illustration of the resulting consent problem. As Section 5 shows, Namibians endorse continental trade almost universally, yet they are barely aware of the AfCFTA and want far fewer foreign job seekers. The gap between elite commitment and mass attitude is exactly where a resource-driven influx of regional labour will apply pressure, and it is a gap that the integration literature, focused on ratification and treaty design, has largely failed to see.

The migration about which Namibians are so cautious is, as yet, numerically modest. The 2023 Population and Housing Census enumerated 3,022,401 people, more than double the 1,409,920 recorded in 1991, and it puts non-Namibians at just 4.8 per cent of the population, of whom roughly 61.5 per cent are Angolan, 14.8 per cent Zambian, and 6.9 per cent Zimbabwean (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2024). The foreign presence is thus small, overwhelmingly regional, and concentrated toward the northern border. That the public should be so restrictive toward migrant workers when the actual migrant stock is this modest is itself telling. The opposition is anticipatory and sociotropic, a judgement about competition for scarce work and about the labour the boom will import, rather than a reaction to a large or visible foreign population already on the ground. It is, in that sense, a disposition formed in advance of the influx it fears, which is precisely why the attitudes measured here matter for a boom that has barely begun.

2.5 The South African shadow

Finally, Namibia's boom coincides with a hardening of anti-migrant politics in South Africa, its largest trading partner, its dominant media presence, and the destination of much regional migration. The Southern African literature reads South African xenophobia not as episodic but as structurally embedded. It has erupted into violence in 2008, 2015, and again in the mid-2020s, and it has increasingly been organised through the securitisation of migration (Crush and Ramachandran, 2014; Landau, 2011; Misago, 2019). The 2025–26 escalation is distinctive for its institutionalisation. Operation Dudula has become a registered movement deploying vigilante enforcement, blocking foreigners from clinics, schools, and workplaces, and it has been met,

tellingly, by court interdicts rather than state protection (Human Rights Watch, 2026; SIHMA, 2025). The open question for the region is whether South Africa's trajectory, the fusion of economic grievance with ethnocultural hostility and its mobilisation into exclusionary politics, is idiosyncratic to its post-apartheid inequality and township political economy or a transferable template. Namibia, which shares much of South Africa's labour-market structure and inheritance, is a revealing test, and, as Section 5 shows, an instructive contrast.

3. Theoretical expectations

The comparative study of immigration attitudes is one of the most developed in political behaviour, but it has been built almost entirely on the publics of the global North, and its central question has been which individuals oppose immigration and why (Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). Its animating distinction is between realistic threat, the sense that migrants compete for material goods, jobs, wages, and public services, and symbolic threat, the sense that they endanger the in-group's identity, culture, and status. A generation of research has sought to weigh these against each other. Its broad verdict, drawn from Western Europe and North America, is that narrow economic self-interest is a weaker driver than either sociotropic economic concern or cultural anxiety. Whether that verdict travels to a very different setting is largely unknown. Here a lower-income population, with a large informal sector, high unemployment, a thin welfare state, and a living memory of colonial labour coercion, contemplates receiving migrants from its still-poorer neighbours. This is the theoretical opening the Namibian case addresses.

There is a second, less-noticed question that the case brings to the fore. The Northern literature implicitly treats immigration attitudes as contested, as varying systematically across individuals according to their position and predispositions, so that the analytic task is to partition that variation among competing drivers. But attitudes can also be consensual. They can form a settled majority disposition, a social norm shared so widely that it ceases to track individual position at all. Where an attitude approaches consensus, the very machinery of the drivers literature loses purchase, not because no mechanism is operating but because whatever produced the attitude has operated on nearly everyone. Distinguishing a contested attitude from a consensual one is thus a prior question, and, as Section 6 shows, it is the key to reading the Namibian evidence. With that framing in place, we draw five substantive expectations from the literature and adapt them to the Namibian context.

The first is economic self-interest. Labour-market-competition models predict that the natives who compete most directly with migrants, the unemployed, the low-skilled, and the poor, are the most opposed, with the skill gradient conditioned by a country's relative factor endowments, so that unskilled natives in skill-scarce economies feel the sharpest competition (Scheve and Slaughter, 2001; Mayda, 2006). This pocketbook channel has proved surprisingly weak in affluent democracies, where the highly skilled are preferred by rich and poor natives alike and attitudes track beliefs about the collective more than personal exposure (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010). Yet a growing body of work qualifies that verdict. Self-interest reasserts itself where competition

is concentrated in the sectors and occupations migrants actually enter, and in tighter, poorer labour markets where the competition is real rather than hypothetical (Dancygier and Donnelly, 2013; Valentino et al., 2019). A resource economy with strict unemployment near 37 per cent, and a broad rate above one in two, is as tight and precarious a labour market as the literature contemplates. We therefore expect (H1) restrictionism to rise with personal labour-market vulnerability, with unemployment, low education, and lived poverty. The case also suggests a subtler possibility that bears directly on the consensus question. Where economic insecurity is not the condition of a distinct minority but the pervasive experience of the majority, self-interest might produce not a gradient of restrictionism across secure and insecure but a plateau, a shared defensiveness that fails to discriminate among individuals precisely because almost everyone is exposed.

The second is sociotropic threat. Attitudes may track judgements about the collective, the health of the national economy, the competence of the state, and the strain on public provision, rather than the respondent's own circumstances (Citrin et al., 1997; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). On this account it is the belief that migrants are "bad for the economy," or that government is failing to create the jobs citizens need, that drives opposition, and the relevant survey items are framed accordingly. The sociotropic channel is especially plausible in the Namibian case, for a reason the descriptive data make plain. Because the actual migrant presence is small (Section 2.4), opposition to migrant labour cannot be a straightforward reaction to lived competition on the ground. It must be, in large part, anticipatory, a prospective judgement about the labour the resource boom will import and about the state's capacity to ensure that its jobs go to Namibians. Anticipatory attitudes of this kind are, almost by construction, sociotropic. We expect (H2) restrictionism to rise with negative evaluations of national economic conditions and, especially, of government performance on job creation.

The third expectation is cultural and group-position threat. Realistic-group-conflict and group-position theories hold that opposition expresses a defence of the in-group's standing and identity, mobilised as the size or visibility of an out-group rises, and that material and symbolic threat often travel together (Blumer, 1958; Blalock, 1967; Quillian, 1995). The Southern African variant is the graded citizenship and the figure of the *makwerekwere*, the denigrated foreign African, that the regional literature has documented (Nyamnjoh, 2006). Two testable expectations follow for Namibia. If cultural threat were the master mechanism, then social distance from migrants and economic restrictionism should move together, and national-identity salience should predict both. We expect (H3) that national-identity salience will matter. But our analysis, which treats economic and social attitudes as potentially separate dimensions, allows for the possibility that identity operates chiefly on the social dimension while leaving the economic one to a different logic. The broader comparative question of when the two dimensions fuse, and what conditions drive that fusion across African publics, we reserve for a companion paper; here the concern is Namibia's own structure.

The fourth is intergroup contact and border geography. Contact theory predicts that proximity and everyday interaction, under the right conditions, reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and

Tropp, 2006), and Afrobarometer evidence finds that residents of border regions are more supportive of free movement across the continent (Whitaker, 2023). Namibia offers a clean test. Its northern regions, Kavango, Ohangwena, Omusati, and above all the Zambezi, abut Angola, Zambia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe and have absorbed cross-border movement for generations, while its interior and its southern coast have not. We expect (H4) more open attitudes among urban residents and among those in the northern border regions. It is worth distinguishing, however, between contact as an individual attribute and border residence as a contextual one. The effect, if it exists, may attach to places rather than to persons, a distinction to which the regional analysis in Section 6 returns.

The fifth is political mediation, and here the Namibian case departs most sharply from the Northern template. Namibia carries a liberation-era, pan-Africanist solidarity norm of considerable depth. SWAPO waged its independence struggle from exile in Angola, Zambia, and Tanzania, sheltered by the frontline states, and the reciprocal obligation that history created is part of the governing party's self-understanding and of the national narrative of independence in 1990. Such a norm might sustain abstract openness, support for regional free movement and comfort with migrants as neighbours, even as material pressures drive concrete labour restriction, and it might do so most strongly among governing-party identifiers and older, liberation-generation cohorts. But the same governing party now presides over a developmental-nationalist project, Namibianisation, "jobs for Namibians," and the 500,000-jobs pledge, whose logic points the other way, toward protecting the domestic labour market. We expect (H5) that party attachment and political trust will be associated with greater openness at the level of principle, while we remain agnostic as to whether the solidarity norm can survive the distributive pressures of the boom.

Underlying all five expectations is a distinctively Namibian prior that the Northern literature has no occasion to consider, the memory of migrant labour itself. For Namibians, "migrant worker" is not an abstract category but one inherited from the contract-labour system described in Section 2.1: a system of movement organised for the benefit of others, resisted at great cost, and central to the story of national liberation. That memory may cut in more than one direction. It may run toward solidarity with those who now migrate for work, or toward a determination that Namibian labour, so long exploited, should not again be displaced. Which of these predominates is an empirical question, but its presence means that attitudes toward migrant workers in Namibia are formed on grounds the comparative models do not map. Taken together, these considerations lead us to expect that several drivers well supported elsewhere may find little individual-level purchase in Namibia. Not because the mechanisms are absent, but, as we will argue, because the attitude they would explain has become too widely shared to vary.

4. Data and methods

The analysis draws on Afrobarometer Round 10 in Namibia, a nationally representative face-to-face survey of 1,200 adults fielded in early 2024 by Survey Warehouse, the Afrobarometer national partner in Namibia. The sample is stratified by region and urban–rural location, with enumeration areas selected with probability proportional to size and respondents drawn by random

walk and Kish grid to give every adult an equal selection probability. All estimates reported here use the within-country household weight (`withinwt_hh`), which corrects for unequal selection probabilities and household size. Regression inference uses standard errors clustered on the enumeration area (150 primary sampling units), and a full complex-survey replication with regional stratification is reported as a robustness check. The regional comparison in Section 5.3 draws on the 38-country merged Round 10 release, using the combined household weight (`Combinwt_new_hh`), which equalises national sample sizes so that no single country dominates the continental picture.

The migration module supplies the dependent variables. The flagship outcome is the admission of foreign job seekers: respondents are asked whether Namibia should admit more, the same number, fewer, or no foreign people who come to seek work. We complement it with four further items: the perceived economic impact of foreign migrants; attitudes toward admitting refugees; the acceptance of immigrants and foreign workers as neighbours, drawn from a standard social-distance battery; and, as the openness benchmark, support for regional free movement of people versus limiting cross-border movement, preferred trading partners, and awareness of the AfCFTA. A parallel item on personal consideration of emigration provides the "mirror" analysed in Section 5.4. Predictors, mapped to the five hypotheses, include age, gender, education, employment status, the Afrobarometer Lived Poverty Index, evaluations of national and personal economic conditions, government handling of job creation, perceived corruption, national-versus-ethnic identity, closeness to the governing party, urban residence, and an indicator for the northern border regions (Zambezi, Kavango East and West, Ohangwena, Omusati, and Kunene).

The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, weighted description establishes the attitude gradient, its internal structure, and its regional placement. Second, exploratory factor analysis, using principal-axis extraction with varimax rotation, tests whether economic and social attitudes form distinct dimensions. Third, survey-weighted logistic and ordered-logistic regressions, entered in theoretically ordered blocks, identify the drivers of each dimension. Fourth, latent-class analysis recovers attitude types and sizes the constituencies for and against an open labour regime. Two features of the flagship outcome shape the interpretation throughout. It is heavily skewed toward restriction, since roughly three-quarters of respondents fall on the restrictive side, and that skew mechanically limits the variance available to explain and the statistical power to detect predictors. We therefore read the low explanatory power of the individual-level models substantively, as evidence of consensus rather than as mere weakness, and we test that reading against a battery of alternative specifications, using alternative weights, no weights, regional fixed effects, and an ordered model on the full four-category outcome. All analyses were conducted in Python, using `pandas`, `statsmodels`, a bespoke implementation of principal-axis factoring, and `StepMix` for the latent-class models, and a parallel R *survey* implementation reproduces the design-based results.

5. The structure of attitudes

5.1 Open in principle, closed at the paycheque

The central descriptive fact is a steep gradient from principle to practice (Figure 1). Namibians are strikingly open in the abstract. Some 89 per cent want to trade with all of Africa or with the whole world rather than only within the region; 59 per cent endorse the free movement of people across borders to trade and work over limiting such movement to protect citizens; and only about 20 per cent say they would dislike having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours. Yet openness collapses as the question turns concrete. Just under a third regard migrants' economic impact as positive; only 24 per cent would admit the same number of, or more, foreign job seekers; and 76 per cent want fewer or none. Attitudes toward refugees are similarly restrictive, with 79 per cent wanting fewer or none. Two further facts sharpen the picture. Awareness of the AfCFTA stands at only 14 per cent, so the abstract enthusiasm for continental integration rests on very thin information. And 35 per cent of Namibians have themselves considered emigrating, overwhelmingly in search of work, which is the very mobility they would deny to inbound workers, a reciprocity gap to which we return.

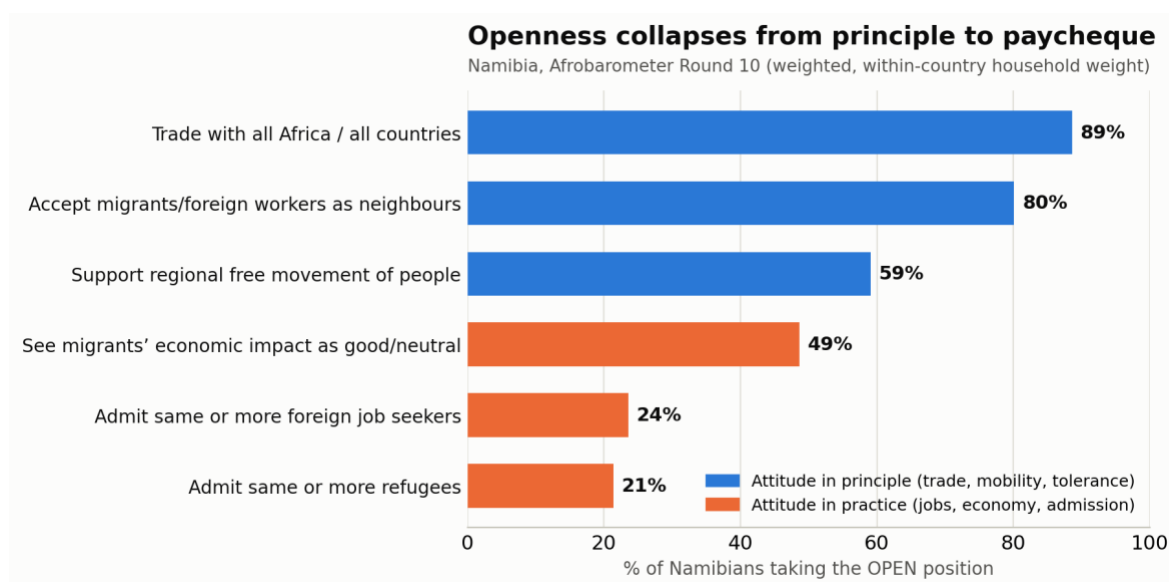


Figure 1. The principle–practice gradient in Namibian attitudes, Afrobarometer Round 10 (weighted). Openness collapses as the object moves from trade and mobility in the abstract to the admission of foreign workers.

The pattern is not mere inconsistency, and two features point toward its mechanism. First, rejection is economic rather than social. Only a fifth dislike migrants as neighbours, but half judge their economic impact negative and three-quarters want fewer competing for work. Whatever moves Namibians on the labour question, it is not, in the main, an aversion to the cultural presence of foreigners. Second, the restrictionism is specific enough to jobs and general enough to reach refugees that it reads as a labour-market and sociotropic register, a concern about scarce work and strained provision, rather than an ethnocultural one. Both features anticipate the two-dimensional structure that we now establish formally.

5.2 Two dimensions, not one

Exploratory factor analysis of the five migration-attitude items returns two factors with eigenvalues above unity (1.82 and 1.53), and a rotated solution that is unusually clean. The three admission-and-impact items, economic impact, foreign job seekers, and refugees, load on one factor (loadings 0.36, 0.67, and 0.64 respectively). The two neighbour items load on the other (both 0.71). Cross-loadings are negligible, all below 0.11. The economic subscale is modestly reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.55$, reflecting the heterogeneity of its three objects), and the social subscale more so ($\alpha = 0.77$). The substantive implication is that "attitude toward migrant workers" is not a single disposition. A Namibian can want the labour market closed while being entirely comfortable living beside migrants, and, as the distributions in Section 5.1 imply and the typology in Section 6.2 confirms, very many are precisely that. The economic and social dimensions must therefore be theorised, and modelled, separately. Collapsing them, as a unidimensional "xenophobia" measure would, discards the most informative feature of the data.

5.3 Namibia in Southern Africa

Benchmarking Namibia against the fifteen SADC countries surveyed in Round 10 does two things. On the labour question, it confirms that Namibia is genuinely restrictive. At 76 per cent wanting fewer or no foreign job seekers, it is the fourth most restrictive of the fifteen, behind only South Africa (84 per cent), Eswatini, and Zambia (both 82 per cent), and well above the regional mean of 68 per cent. Taken alone, this looks like a country primed for backlash (Table 1).

Table 1. Namibia against South Africa and the SADC average on the core migration items, Round 10 (weighted percentages, combined weight). Namibia is well above the regional average on economic restriction yet well below both South Africa and the average on social intolerance. The full fifteen-country comparison, and the cross-national analysis of when the two dimensions fuse, are developed in a companion paper; here the aim is only to locate Namibia's distinctive position.

	Fewer/no job seekers	Dislike as neighbours	Support free movement	Aware of AfCFTA
Namibia	76	20	59	14
South Africa	84	49	42	12
<i>SADC-15 average</i>	<i>68</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>12</i>

Two kinds of closure: Namibia restricts jobs but tolerates people

SADC countries in Afrobarometer Round 10 (combined weight). Dashed lines = regional means.

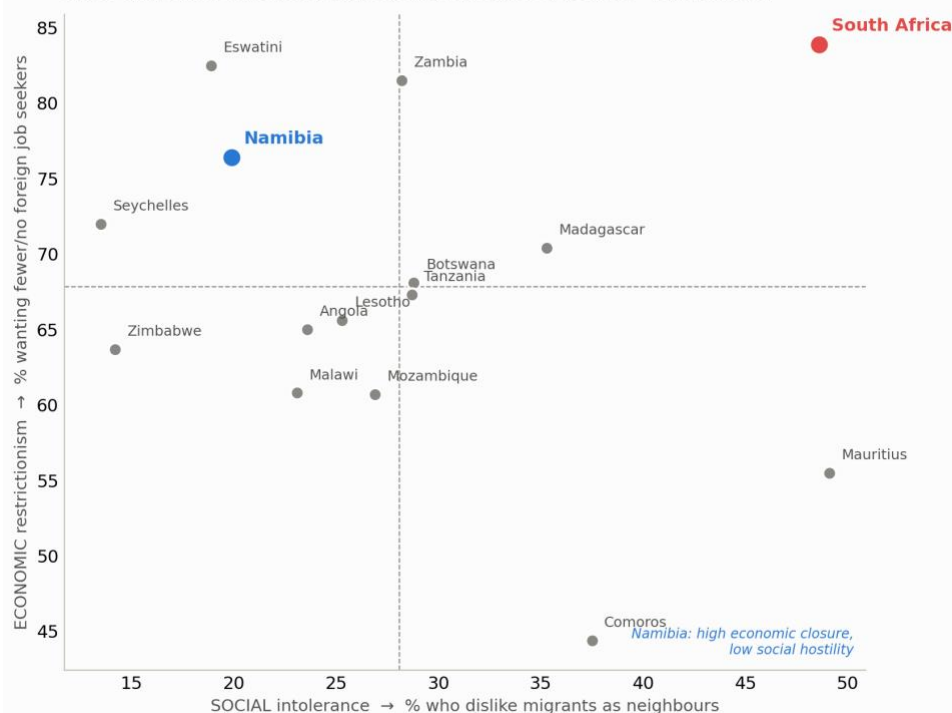


Figure 2. Two dimensions of closure across SADC, Round 10 (combined weight). The vertical axis is economic restrictionism, the share wanting fewer or no foreign job seekers; the horizontal axis is social intolerance, the share disliking migrants as neighbours. Namibia sits in the high-economic, low-social quadrant, while South Africa, alone, is high on both.

The two-dimensional view (Figure 2) tells a more precise story. Namibia sits in the upper-left quadrant, high on economic closure but low on social hostility, with only about a fifth disliking migrants as neighbours. South Africa sits alone in the upper-right, restrictive on labour and hostile to migrants as people, since some 48 per cent dislike them as neighbours. Across the region the two dimensions barely move together; the country-level correlation between social dislike and economic restriction is essentially nil ($r \approx -0.19$), and only South Africa and Mauritius combine both at high levels. Namibia ranks fourth most tolerant of the fifteen on the social measure even as it ranks fourth most restrictive on the labour measure, one of the widest "tolerant-people, closed-labour-market" gaps in SADC. Whatever Namibia shares with South Africa, a common border, a shared labour-market structure, and an intertwined media space, it does not, on this evidence, share South Africa's ethnocultural hostility toward migrants. This distinction, developed in Section 7, is central to assessing whether Namibia is likely to follow the South African path.

5.4 The emigration mirror

Before turning to drivers, one further descriptive result deserves emphasis, because it complicates any reading of Namibian restrictionism as simple parochialism. The same survey that finds three-quarters of Namibians wanting fewer foreign job seekers finds that 35 per cent have themselves considered leaving Namibia to live in another country, and that, among those who have, the overwhelming motive is work and economic opportunity, with the most-named destinations lying

within the region and in the wealthier economies beyond it. Namibians, in other words, both aspire to the labour mobility they would deny to others and belong to a society whose economy was historically organised around the export of contract labour. This reciprocity gap, restrictive toward inbound workers yet aspirational about outbound movement, is not unique to Namibia, for it recurs across the African survey evidence, but it is sharpened here by the historical resonance of migrant labour, and it bears directly on the normative debate about free movement to which Section 7 returns.

6. Drivers and types

6.1 A consensus, not a grievance

Who, then, are the restrictionists? The striking answer, and the article's central finding, is that they are nearly everyone, and no one in particular. Disaggregating the share wanting fewer or no foreign job seekers by every available cleavage, employment status, lived poverty, education, age, urban–rural location, partisanship, and border residence, the figure never leaves the 64-to-81 per cent band and clusters tightly around the national 76 per cent (Figure 3). The economically secure are barely less restrictive than the poor: 68 per cent of those with no lived poverty want fewer or no foreign job seekers, against 76 to 78 per cent of the poor. The university-educated match the primary-educated, at 75 against 76 per cent. Governing-party identifiers are indistinguishable from everyone else, at 78 against 76 per cent. Residents of the northern border regions look like the interior, at 77 against 76 per cent. Anti-migrant-worker sentiment in Namibia is not the property of a threatened or mobilisable minority. It is a settled majority position that cuts across the usual lines of social division.

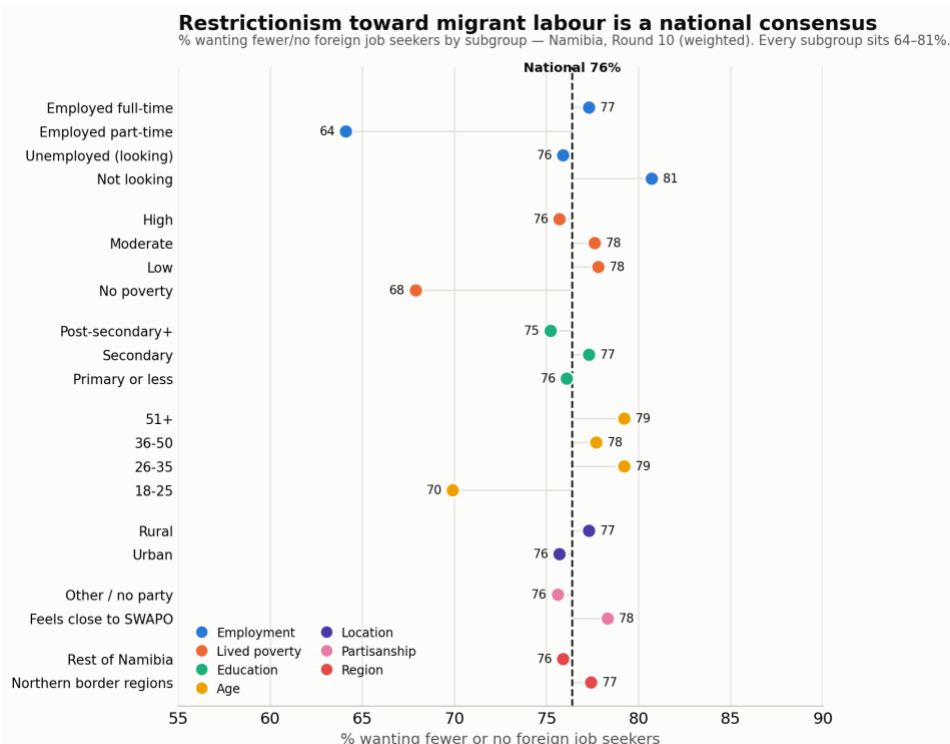


Figure 3. Share wanting fewer or no foreign job seekers, by subgroup, Round 10 (weighted). Every subgroup sits between 64 and 81 per cent, and the dashed line marks the national estimate of 76 per cent.

Multivariate analysis confirms the point and sharpens its interpretation. A survey-weighted logistic regression of restrictionism on the full battery of predictors explains almost nothing, since the McFadden pseudo- R^2 is approximately 0.015, and no predictor reaches conventional significance save one. Namibians who think the government is handling job creation well are modestly less restrictive (odds ratio ≈ 0.83 , $p \approx 0.05$), a faint sociotropic trace consistent with H2. Personal labour-market vulnerability points in the expected direction, and the unemployed and those outside the labour force are somewhat more restrictive (odds ratios of 1.34 and 1.41), but the estimates are imprecise and fall short of significance, so H1 finds only weak support. The contrast with the social dimension is instructive. The identical model applied to disliking migrants as neighbours does have structure. Social intolerance falls significantly with education (odds ratio ≈ 0.88 per level, $p < 0.01$) and rises markedly among urban residents (odds ratio ≈ 1.61 , $p < 0.05$), with weaker signals from gender and national economic mood. The social dimension, in short, behaves like the prejudice the comparative literature describes, softened by education and sharpened by the denser and more competitive urban setting, while the economic dimension behaves like a national norm. Table 2 reports both models in full.

Table 2. Survey-weighted logistic regressions of economic restrictionism (fewer/no foreign job seekers) and social intolerance (dislike migrants as neighbours), Round 10. Cells are odds ratios; standard errors clustered on the enumeration area. Reference categories: male, rural, employed. Significance: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.10$.

Predictor	Foreign job seekers (OR)	Migrants as neighbours (OR)
Age (years)	1.01	1.00
Female	0.96	0.76†
Education (0–9)	1.00	0.88**
Urban residence	1.04	1.61*
Unemployed, seeking	1.34	1.20
Not in labour force	1.41	0.96
Lived Poverty Index	0.90	0.86
Personal living conditions (better)	0.91	0.89
National economy positive	1.05	1.19†
Government handling jobs (better)	0.83†	0.97
Country going wrong direction	0.82	0.95
Perceives rising corruption	1.22	0.91
Feels close to SWAPO	1.20	1.23
National (vs. ethnic) identity	1.06	0.91
Northern border region	0.99	0.82
McFadden pseudo- R^2	0.015	0.032
N	1,040	1,048

These results are robust. Re-estimating with the alternative enumeration-area weight, without weights, with regional fixed effects, and as an ordered logit on the full four-category outcome

leaves the picture intact. The pseudo- R^2 remains low, and the government-jobs effect is the one consistent, indeed strengthening, predictor, with odds ratios between 0.74 and 0.83 across specifications. Two qualifications emerge from the robustness battery and carry into the interpretation. First, regional fixed effects raise the pseudo- R^2 sharply, to about 0.089, which indicates that contextual variation across Namibia's regions explains considerably more than any individual attribute. That pattern rewards the fuller multilevel treatment we flag as a future extension, and it is consistent with the border-geography intuition of H4 operating at the level of place rather than person. Second, the ordered model recovers one effect the binary collapse masks, national-identity salience. Namibians who identify as "only" or "more" Namibian than by their ethnic group are significantly more restrictive toward foreign workers ($\beta \approx +0.12$, $p \approx 0.02$), a nativist inflection consistent with H3 and with group-position theory. The consensus, that is, is not perfectly flat. It intensifies where national identity is most salient, even as it fails to track material circumstance.

6.2 Three attitude types

Latent-class analysis of the migration battery sorts Namibians into three types (Figure 4), and the result is politically decisive. A 60 per cent majority are *consensus restrictionists*, open to trade in the abstract, indifferent to migrants as neighbours, but flatly closed to admitting foreign job seekers and negative about their economic impact. A fifth are *principled cosmopolitans*, who maximally endorse trade and free movement and warmly accept migrants socially, and yet, tellingly, whose openness to actually admitting job seekers is barely above the restrictionists'. Only the remaining fifth, the *labour liberals*, are genuinely willing to admit migrant workers. They are somewhat younger and more urban than the rest, but they too are unremarkable in class and education terms.

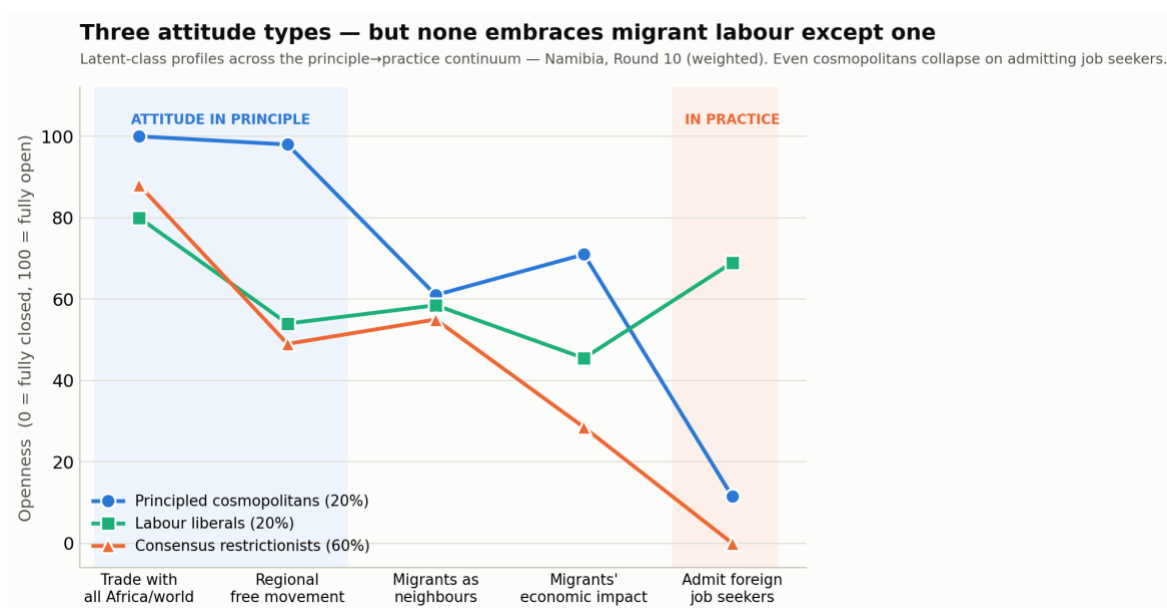


Figure 4. Weighted latent-class profiles across the principle-to-practice continuum. Every type falls sharply on admitting foreign job seekers except the labour liberals, and even the cosmopolitans collapse.

Two implications follow. First, there is no coalition-in-waiting for an open labour regime, since at most one Namibian in five would admit the same number of, or more, foreign workers. Second, and this is the sharpest single result in the data, cosmopolitanism does not travel to the labour market. The very people most likely to champion African integration in the abstract are, in practice, almost as protective of domestic jobs as everyone else. Elite pro-integration framing therefore cannot presume a receptive base even among the liberal minority. As with the regressions, the types divide by attitude rather than by social position, differing only marginally in education, class, or region. The typology thus corroborates, in a second methodological register, the central finding that opposition to migrant labour is a broadly shared disposition rather than the grievance of a distinct and identifiable group.

7. Discussion: what the attitudes mean for Namibia's future

Three conclusions bear on the resource moment, and each follows from the consensual, economic character of the attitude documented above.

The first is that the coming friction will be about jobs, not culture. Because rejection of migrant workers is economic and consensual rather than ethnocultural and marginal, the danger point of the boom is the perception that foreign workers are taking jobs that were meant to be created for Namibians. This is not a speculative worry. It is the precise scenario that the state's own local-content architecture, and the skills gap that architecture must confront, conspire to produce. The National Upstream Petroleum Local Content Policy promises Namibianisation; the training-system assessments concede that the skills for the hydrogen and petroleum build-out do not yet exist domestically; and the sober sectoral verdict is that "foreign experts are expected to dominate senior positions" in the early years (GIZ, 2025; Renewables Policy and Practice, 2024). The gap between the promise and the near-term reality is the gap into which public resentment can flow. What the attitudinal evidence adds is that this resentment will not be confined to a marginal fringe susceptible to reassurance; it is the baseline expectation of three-quarters of the public. The decisive policy instruments are therefore those that make Namibianisation visible and credible: enforceable local-content plans, transparent reporting on the share of Namibians employed, genuine skills-transfer and understudy arrangements, and honesty about the timetable on which foreign expertise will give way to local. Anti-xenophobia messaging is not the priority, because it addresses a social hostility that Namibia, comparatively, does not strongly exhibit.

The second conclusion is that growth alone will not dissolve the attitude, and this is where the consensus finding does its most important analytical work. If opposition to migrant labour tracked poverty, unemployment, or lack of education, then a boom that raised incomes and expanded the middle class might be expected, over time, to soften it. But the attitude does not track those things. The secure and the insecure, the educated and the unschooled, hold it in almost equal measure, so a rising tide will not, on this evidence, wash it away. If anything, the one robust individual-level signal points to a different lever. What modestly moves the attitude is not personal prosperity but the perception that the state is delivering jobs, the sociotropic government-performance effect. A boom that is seen to create Namibian jobs may therefore ease acceptance of the foreign labour it

also requires. A boom that is seen to enrich outsiders and connected insiders while leaving the 500,000-jobs promise unmet will not, however much aggregate income it generates. The politics of the resource moment, in other words, will be made not by GDP but by the visible distribution of work.

The third conclusion concerns the comparison with South Africa. On present evidence Namibia is not following the South African template. The two countries occupy different attitudinal quadrants. South Africa couples economic restrictionism with high social hostility and has organised both into movement politics and a securitised state response, whereas Namibia is restrictive on labour but retains a genuine reservoir of social tolerance and a residual pan-African solidarity norm. But the reservoir is conditional, not guaranteed, and the analysis identifies with some precision the conditions under which it might drain. Because Namibian restrictionism is already a broad consensus, the latent substrate for a South-African-style coupling of economic and social hostility exists. What Namibia lacks, for now, is the mobilising infrastructure and the permissive elite discourse that turned South African grievance into pogrom. The nativist inflection detected in the ordered model, the sharpening of restrictionism where national identity is most salient, is the thread most likely to be pulled by any political entrepreneur seeking to fuse the two dimensions. And the coastal boom towns of the Erongo and //Kharas regions, urbanising, and the very places where the analysis finds social tolerance thinnest and where oil and hydrogen labour will concentrate, are the plausible sites where such a fusion could begin. That is the scenario that migration governance and local-content credibility should be designed to forestall. The systematic question of what conditions drive the fusion of economic and social hostility across African publics, with South Africa as the high-fusion case and Namibia among the low-fusion counter-cases, is the subject of a companion paper. The point to be drawn here is narrower and prospective: what Namibia's distinctive position implies for its own trajectory through the resource moment.

Beyond Namibia, the findings speak to the continental debate about free movement. Namibians' near-universal support for trading with Africa, set against their low awareness of the AfCFTA and their restrictiveness toward foreign workers, exposes the thin mass consent beneath elite integration commitments. Free movement, negotiated at summits, presumes a public that has not been asked and that, when asked, is far more cautious about the movement of workers than about the movement of goods. A resource boom that draws regional workers into Namibia will test that consent precisely where it is weakest. There is also a historical dimension that the Namibian case makes unusually legible. A nation whose independence was won in part against a coerced system of migrant contract labour now finds itself an aspiring importer of labour, and a reluctant one, its citizens wanting for themselves the mobility they would deny to others. The memory of SWANLA and the 1971–72 strike is not merely decorative background. It is part of why "migrant labour" carries the charge it does, and part of why a politics of Namibianisation resonates so powerfully. The resource moment will be governed well or badly in part according to whether that history is acknowledged or ignored.

8. Conclusion

On the eve of its resource boom, Namibia presents a public that is open in principle and closed at the paycheque. Namibians welcome continental trade and regional mobility in the abstract, and they accept migrants as neighbours, yet three-quarters would admit fewer or no foreign job seekers. That economic restrictionism is empirically distinct from social tolerance, it is regionally high, and, most strikingly, it is a broad national consensus rather than the grievance of any threatened group. Namibia is not South Africa. It restricts labour without the ethnocultural hostility that has fuelled organised xenophobia next door. But its consensus is a substrate that a jobless boom, or an enterprising politics, could activate.

The policy implication is unusually clear for a study of public opinion. Because the sentiment is consensual and economic, and because it will not be dissolved by aggregate growth alone, the credibility of local-content policy is the single most important instrument for absorbing resource-driven in-migration without exclusionary backlash. That means real Namibianisation, visible skills transfer, honest timelines, and the demonstrable creation of domestic jobs. This article has offered a baseline, measured before the boom's labour effects are felt. The analysis is cross-sectional and cannot speak to how these attitudes will move as foreign workers actually arrive, and the low individual-level explanatory power, while substantively meaningful, also reflects a skewed outcome and invites the multilevel and longitudinal extensions we have flagged.

Several further limitations qualify the findings and mark the agenda for future work. The consensus result rests in part on a ceiling effect. With roughly three-quarters of respondents on the restrictive side, there is little variance for individual-level models to explain, so the flat pseudo- R^2 should be read as consistent with, rather than conclusive proof of, an unstructured attitude. The economic subscale is only modestly reliable, which is why the analysis leans on the single most on-topic item, admission of foreign job seekers, rather than a composite. The presidential-trust measure was unavailable because of the death of Namibia's president during the 2024 presidential transition split the item, so the political channel is proxied by corruption perceptions and party attachment, and a fuller treatment of political mediation awaits data that measure trust cleanly. Inference here is design-consistent, using survey-weighted point estimates with enumeration-area cluster-robust standard errors, but the accompanying R *survey* replication, which also models stratification, should be regarded as the canonical form. And the regional fixed-effects result, which shows context outperforming individual attributes, points clearly toward a multilevel analysis that models Namibia's regions, and ultimately its place among African publics, directly. Round 11 of the Afrobarometer, fielded once the boom is under way, will provide the confirmatory test of whether Namibia's reservoir of tolerance holds, or whether it, too, drains at the paycheque. For a nation made by migrant labour, and remade against it, the answer will say a great deal about the kind of country the resource moment builds.

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