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Cities of Contagion: Pandemic Precarity, Migration, and Food Security in Urban Africa

Guest Editors Jonathan Crush and Zack Ahmed

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Introduction
Cities of Contagion: Pandemic Precarity, Migration, and Food Security in Urban Africa

Guest Editors: Prof. Jonathan Crush[1] and Mr. Zack Ahmed[2]

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on the global economy, highlighting deep structural vulnerabilities across regions, countries, and economic sectors (Baber, 2020; Anyanwu and Salami, 2021; Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021; Delardas et al., 2022). Among the most profound disruptions were those in food supply chains, which experienced bottlenecks and severe price volatility (Aday and Aday, 2020; Deconinck et al., 2020; Vyas et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022). Transportation restrictions compounded the challenges, leading to critical food shortages and prompting governments to implement regulatory policies to mitigate supply chain disruption (Walters et al., 2020). Demand-side shocks such as panic buying further strained food systems, exacerbating labor shortages and supply chain fragility (Hobbs, 2020). Labor shortages and movement restrictions limited farming activities and delayed the transportation of goods, depressing agricultural production, increasing food dumping by farmers, and driving up food prices (Ellison and Kalaitzandonakes, 2020; FAO, 2020; Siminiuc and Turcanu, 2020; Chari, 2022). With many countries imposing export restrictions to try and protect domestic consumers, food prices soared, and global food insecurity deteriorated (Crush and Si, 2020; Espitia et al., 2020; Glauber et al., 2020; Béné et al., 2021; Falkendal et al., 2021).

There is now an abundance of evidence that the pandemic affected the livelihoods of marginalized and vulnerable groups in the food system disproportionately, including small-scale farmers, farmworkers, food processing workers, and informal food marketers (Mubangizi, 2021; Kesar et al., 2022; Ahmed et al., 2024; Crush and Tawodzera, 2024). Job loss and unemployment particularly affected groups already vulnerable to economic shocks, exacerbating health crises and psychological distress. Pre-pandemic vulnerability to inequality, poverty, and economic insecurity was exacerbated, weakening resilience and reinforcing disadvantage. Pandemic precarity was characterized by falling incomes,

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multidimensional poverty, and debilitating food insecurity (Sumner et al., 2020; Alkire et al., 2021; Bambra et al., 2021; Onyango et al., 2023).

Urban areas were at the geographical epicenter of pandemic precarity in Africa and elsewhere (Lai et al., 2020; Martínez and Short, 2021). Stringent lockdown measures, supply chain disruption, and restrictions on movement diminished food availability and accessibility in cities. In vulnerable urban communities, food shortages led to reduced consumption, heightened hunger, and growing malnutrition, particularly in cities of the Global South (Moseley and Battersby, 2020; Bukari et al., 2022; Chirisa et al., 2022). The closure of informal markets and restrictions on venues serving food further disrupted food availability, access, and stability (Crush and Si, 2020; Narayanan and Saha, 2020). These food system challenges compounded preexisting inequalities, particularly affecting those reliant on the informal economy (Tawodzera and Crush, 2022).

Despite the wealth of literature addressing the broader socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 pandemic precarity, there remains a notable gap in understanding the differential impacts on migrants and refugees in Africa. Most studies to date have focused on consequences for the general population, neglecting the compounded vulnerabilities of these marginalized groups. That said, migrants and refugees were affected disproportionately by pandemic precarity, as they were more likely to be in unstable employment, to live in overcrowded conditions with high rates of transmission, and to be excluded from government relief measures (Dempster et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2021; Deshingkar, 2022; Ramachandran et al., 2024). Migrants, due to their legal status, lack of access to formal employment, and limited mobility, faced greater exposure to the virus and its economic consequences (Mengesha et al., 2022). Barriers to access to healthcare and discrimination against non-citizens amplified their mental health challenges and further marginalized these populations (Saifee et al., 2021). Furthermore, COVID-19 fueled nationalist sentiments, resulting in xenophobic policies that targeted migrant communities (Hennebry and KC, 2020; Mukumbang, 2021). Many governments excluded migrants from pandemic relief efforts, exacerbating economic hardships (Freier et al., 2020; Mukumbang et al., 2020).

Informal markets, essential for both livelihood and food access, were severely affected by lockdowns and health regulations, leading to a cascade of negative outcomes for both traders and consumers (Crush and Si, 2020). The economic fallout was particularly devastating for low-skilled and informal-sector migrant workers. Losses in employment and income, coupled with the disruption of remittance flows, had severe consequences for migrant families, both in their host cities and home communities. While the pandemic exposed migrant vulnerabilities, it also highlighted the critical, though often invisible, roles that migrants and refugees play in the sustainability of urban food systems. Despite this situation, policy frameworks often overlook the contributions of migrants, leaving them unsupported during times of crisis.

This Special Issue seeks to enhance our understanding of the nexus between migration and food security in urban Africa in at least three ways: first, it examines how COVID-19 impacted migrant populations in African cities by bringing together a selection of the latest research that centers the experiences of migrants before, during, and after the pandemic. Second, given that more and more refugees in Africa are city-based, it looks at how urban refugees pursue a living outside refugee encampments and with what consequences for building food security. And third, it focuses on the links between food security and the participation of migrants in the informal food sector. As a grouping, the papers seek to transcend the simplistic depiction of migrants as passive victims of the pandemic and instead emphasizes their role as active participants in urban food systems, whether as traders, remittance senders, or informal workers. At the same time, the papers draw attention to the structural barriers that continue to limit migrants' agency.

The first group of papers provide a deeper understanding of how COVID-19 has reshaped urban food security in Africa. The first paper by Abel Chikanda, shows the long pre-pandemic history of informal cross-border trading (ICBT) between South Africa and Zimbabwe and its role in stabilizing food security in Zimbabwe. Official hostility toward the informal sector and cross-border trade has an even longer history. The pandemic brought a renewed assault on the livelihoods of informal traders who were seen as a public health danger and had their stalls systematically destroyed across the country. As the author points out, this action eliminated a stable and reliable source of food for the urban population and destabilized the market chains linking cross-border traders and the urban poor in the country.

The second paper by Sean Sithole, Daniel Tevera, and Mulugeta Dinbabo explores how the pandemic transformed the nature of migrant food remitting between South Africa and Zimbabwe. The digitalization of remittances was a pre-pandemic trend that was greatly accelerated by border closures and the resultant shut down of informal cash and food remitting channels. As the authors of this paper show, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these channels and fast-tracked the adoption of advancements in financial technology and migrant use of digital and mobile technologies. In addition to a major shift to digital cash remitting, digital/mobile technology-based channels were increasingly used for food remittances too. Food transfers provided a cushion during the pandemic for households experiencing lowered food access, food shortages, high food prices, and hyper-inflation. The convenience and cost-effectiveness of digital food remitting mean that it is likely here to stay in hybrid form with the reopening of more traditional informal channels.

The next paper by Zack Ahmed, Jonathan Crush, and Samuel Owuor draws on survey research and in-depth interviews with Somali refugees in Nairobi, Kenya, conducted during the latter stages of the pandemic. They point out that most refugees live and work in an area of Nairobi that was designated as a national COVID-19 "hotspot." As well as sealing off the area, most businesses (many of them informal) were closed down, depriving the population of the area of easy access to food.

Additionally, job loss and a fall in income lowered their ability to purchase food, particularly as food prices soared. Over three-quarters of those surveyed said that household economic conditions were worse than before the pandemic and nearly 40% of refugee households were classified as severely food insecure.

The fourth paper by Jonathan Crush, Godfrey Tawodzera, Maria Salamone, and Zack Ahmed turns inward to examine how migrants from the Eastern Cape fared in Cape Town during the pandemic lockdowns. They argue that researchers and policymakers in South Africa reserve the term "migrant" for other countries, which marginalizes the lived experience and struggle for food security of internal migrants. Most migrants remained in Cape Town during the pandemic despite catastrophic levels of job loss and income decline. Their ability to remit funds to family in the Eastern Cape was also badly compromised. Nearly 30% of households were severely food insecure and less than 15% had access to the government COVID-19 social grants. They conclude that migration status needs to be seen as an explanatory variable in assessing pandemic precarity and associated food insecurity.

The second group of papers in this Special Issue are a reminder that even as the worst of the pandemic disappears in the rear-view mirror, precarity and food insecurity have certainly not. The first paper in this grouping by Cherie Enns and colleagues focuses on the precarious lives of young South Sudanese refugees in Nairobi and Nakuru, Kenya. They argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by these urban refugees and that the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations notwithstanding, they still experience food insecurity. Financial support comes from remittances from family members, local communities, and other South Sudanese, as well as from abroad, although COVID-19 suppressed this cash flow. Despite the challenges they face, the paper argues that urban refugee youth are actively involved in positive city-building, and that refugee youth-led organizations need recognition, investment, and support from local government.

The second paper in this group by Andrea Brown examines the food security situation and needs of Kampala's sizable refugee population living in the city's informal settlements. Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa and nearly 140,000 refugees reside in Kampala where their access to employment, housing, and social services is a challenge. Brown argues that they also experience very high levels of food insecurity exacerbated by pandemic-related factors. As she points out, Uganda's COVID-19 response was extremely restrictive and the economic and social burden was felt most intensely by the poorest and most vulnerable residents of the city, especially the refugee population. COVID-19 was experienced more as an economic than a health crisis, only partly mitigated by food distribution programs. Like the previous contribution, this paper concludes with a call to local government and other stakeholders to act proactively, in this case to address post-pandemic refugee vulnerability and food insecurity.

The third paper by Bernard Owusu and Jonathan Crush addresses the post-pandemic food security-remittances nexus through an analysis of the interlinked food security status of migrant-sending households in Accra, Ghana, and Ghanaian labor migrants in Doha, Qatar. The paper juxtaposes the findings from a household survey in Accra and in-depth interviews in Qatar and assesses the impact of remittances on the food security of these translocal households. Food purchase is the most ubiquitous use of remittances by recipients that mitigates, but does not altogether eliminate, food insecurity. If migrants are employed and earning sufficient income in Qatar, they can balance the obligation to remit with their own food needs. However, unemployment and income loss have a negative impact on their ability to remit and their food security situation. These migrants sacrifice their own dietary preferences and food needs to ensure that they have sufficient cash to remit as much and as regularly as they can.

The fourth paper in this group by Godfrey Tawodzera examines the diets and food consumption patterns of Zimbabwean migrants living in Windhoek, Namibia. The paper provides a narrative overview of the recent history of migration to Namibia and the self-settlement of migrants in the low-income area of Katutura. The author then paints a picture from the voices of migrants themselves of the traditional rural and modern urban diets consumed in Zimbabwe before migration. After migration, most migrants relied on a westernized and more unhealthy diet of highly processed foods. Some culturally appropriate foods from Zimbabwe are impossible to access while others are imported, but the purchase price is at a premium. During COVID-19 the supply of imported Zimbabwean foodstuffs slowed to a trickle. Food insecurity manifests in the consumption of undesirable foods and poor health outcomes which, as one of his respondents pointed out, rather defeats the purpose of having migrated to Namibia in the first place.

The final paper in this group by Graeme Young revisits the theme of informal food system governance in the City of Cape Town. The paper examines the types of marginalization experienced by migrant and non-migrant workers Cape Town's informal food economy and addresses the question of why the post-apartheid sector is characterized by exclusion rather than inclusion. Inclusive development is obstructed by massive inequality, the nature of local and national party politics, and the dynamics around migration and informality. The paper concludes that the migrant participants in the informal economy face significant operational challenges, which were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Informal Cross-Border Traders and Food Trade during the Global Pandemic in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The collapse of Zimbabwe's economy in the 2000s resulted in the country relying largely on food imports from other countries, especially from South Africa. Informal cross-border traders (ICBTs) have become crucial players in the country's food economy, playing an important role in the importation of food as well as its retail across the country. Cross-border trading also provides employment opportunities to a large number of people in the country, especially women, in an environment of depressed economic opportunities. The paper relies on data from a variety of sources, including surveys by the Southern African Migration Programme (SAMP) as well as document analysis to demonstrate the role played by ICBTs in the country's food economy. It also assesses how ICBTs were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and examines their strategies employed to continue their business activities during the time of mobility restrictions. More importantly, it demonstrates how the lack of understanding of the contribution of ICBTs to employment generation and urban food security has led to the adoption of policies and practices that do not accommodate informal food trading in the country's urban landscape. The paper also discusses how informal cross-border trading (ICBT) and informal food trading in Zimbabwe have changed in the post-COVID-19 period and sets a research agenda on understanding the role of ICBT in the economies of countries in the Global South.

Keywords: food trade, informal economy, cross-border traders, COVID-19, digital marketing, Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) has become a critical component in the economies of countries in the Global South. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (2021) estimates that ICBT accounts for nearly US$ 25 billion (or 16%) of intra-African trade, while the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2021) estimates that ICBT accounts for between 30–40% of the trade in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. ICBT is defined as "a form of trade that is unrecorded on official statistics and is carried out by small businesses" across international borders (Njiwa, 2013: 9). In some cases, it might involve "bypassing border posts, concealment of goods, under-reporting, false classification, under-invoicing and other similar tricks" (Njiwa, 2013: 9). However, IOM (2021) also notes that a large part of intra-African trade usually goes unrecorded because of inadequate human resources at the customs offices and the lack of incentives to record the flow of goods that are not subject to import duties. In their border monitoring survey of seven countries in Southern Africa in 2008, Peberdy et al. (2015) show that 37% of informal cross-border traders (ICBTs) paid customs duties on their goods. Virtually all ICBTs returning to Malawi (99%) were charged customs duties, as were 78% of those returning to Botswana and 75% of those returning to Zambia. On the contrary, only 7% of those returning to Mozambique and 3% of those returning to Zimbabwe paid customs duties. According to UN Women (2010), nearly 84% of ICBTs interviewed reportedly paid duties for the goods they imported into the country. Therefore, ICBT benefits both the country in which the goods are bought, as they stimulate demand for goods produced in the formal sector, and the country in which the goods are sold through the customs duties paid, provided the relevant infrastructure is available (IOM, 2021).

ICBT has been lauded as a means for poverty alleviation and employment generation among the poor in Africa (Jamela, 2013; Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017; Nyanga et al., 2020). Because of the relative ease of entry into the sector, ICBT can be a potential vehicle for women's empowerment in the region, most of whom lack access to formal employment opportunities (Muzvidziwa, 2015; Dzingirai et al., 2021). In the SADC region, it is estimated that approximately 70% of the ICBTs are women (IOM, 2021).

ICBT, as an integral component of the informal economy, has become critical for the survival of most people in Zimbabwe. A study by Medina and Schneider (2018) shows that Zimbabwe has the third largest informal economy in the world, with the sector contributing 60.6% to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) after Bolivia (62.3%) and Georgia (64.9%). ICBT emerged as a critical component of Zimbabwe's economy since the start of the economic crisis in the country more than two decades ago (Peberdy et al., 2016; Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017; Dzawanda et al., 2022). ICBTs have provided important contributions in making food and other essential goods available on the Zimbabwean market after the industrial collapse that the country witnessed since the start of the twenty-first century. ICBTs have become

a "major lifeline for the Zimbabwean economy," which has "experienced shortages of basic commodities" (SARDC, 2008: 73). Zimbabwe's former minister of Small and Medium Enterprise Development, Dr Sithembiso Nyoni, noted that ICBTs prevented the country's economy from total collapse at the peak of the country's economic crisis in 2008 (*The Herald*, 2011).

This paper documents the role played by ICBTs in the country's food economy. It investigates how ICBTs were affected by, and responded to, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It first uses data from surveys conducted by the Southern African Migration Programme (SAMP) in 1997, 2007, and 2014 to document the role of informal food traders in not only improving the availability of food on the market but also in creating employment opportunities in the country. It then uses document analysis to investigate how ICBT and food trading were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdowns and assesses its current role in Zimbabwe's economy. Document analysis involved a comprehensive search of literature on ICBTs in Zimbabwe during the pandemic. Databases such as Science Direct and Google Scholar were used to identify peer reviewed literature published on this subject. The paper shows that even though ICBTs were able to adopt creative strategies to continue conducting their business activities during the pandemic, their efforts were severely hampered by a policy environment that is hostile toward informal trading activities.

ICBT AND THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN ZIMBABWE

Tevera and Zinyama (2002) regard ICBT as one of the major coping strategies adopted by the poor population in Zimbabwe after the implementation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank-prescribed Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) between 1991 and 1995. ESAP led to growing hardships, especially among the country's urban population, who resorted to a wide range of informal employment activities such as petty commodity trading and manufacturing, while a large number started traveling to neighboring countries such as Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa, and Zambia to buy goods for resale in the country.

A significant proportion of the traders were women seeking to supplement the incomes earned by their spouses in the formal sector (Ndlela, 2006). A recent study by UNECA (2021) demonstrates the value of ICBT relative to formal trade in Zimbabwe's economy. It estimates that ICBT imports from South Africa are worth nearly US$ 900 million, almost half of the value of formal trade imports from that country (see Table 1). Clearly, ICBT constitutes an important element of regional trade integration in the southern African region.

Table 1: Estimate of the value of ICBT relative to formal trade in Zimbabwe (in US$)

Trade partner	Value of formal trade	Estimate of informal trade (low)	Estimate of informal trade (high)
South Africa	$1,852,444,363	$486,829,304	$888,893,788
Mozambique	$90,039,978	$3,730,228	$3,730,228
Botswana	$34,267,949	$9,005,745	$16,443,445
Namibia	$10,630,985	$2,793,863	$5,101,269
Angola	$40,210	$10,567	$19,295

Source: UNECA (2021)

Three SAMP surveys illustrate the changing role of ICBT in Zimbabwe's economy. The first survey conducted in 1997 involved 947 respondents selected from 32 survey areas that were randomly drawn from the country's population census enumeration areas (Tevera and Zinyama, 2002). The survey showed that 210 people (or 22%) of the participants had been to South Africa over the past five years. Among the women participants who had been to South Africa, two-thirds (65%) had traveled for trading purposes, either taking goods such as art and curios for sale there or buying goods for sale upon their return to Zimbabwe. In contrast, Zimbabwean men traveled to South Africa mostly to work or look for a job (41%) while only a third (32%) went there for the purpose of trading. The ICBT traders in the 1990s traded goods such as clothes, electronics, and car parts. Food items and groceries were readily available on the domestic market and were not an attractive option for the traders.

In 2007, SAMP conducted a border-monitoring study to understand the contribution of ICBT in eight partner countries (Peberdy et al., 2015). In Zimbabwe, the survey was conducted at three major border posts, namely Beitbridge (Zimbabwe–South Africa), Forbes (Zimbabwe–Mozambique), Chirundu (Zimbabwe–Zambia) and Nyamapanda (Zimbabwe–Mozambique, also a gateway to trade with Malawi and Tanzania). Border monitors were stationed with customs officials and recorded the type of goods brought in by the traders and their estimated value. This border monitoring survey counted 20,677 people either entering or leaving the country over a 10-day period, 9,412 (or 45.5%) of whom were identified as cross-border traders. In addition, the origin and destination survey was administered to a sub-sample of 1,170 randomly selected ICBTs to understand their trading practices. The survey, which was conducted at the height of the country's economic crisis, showed that food and groceries (69.5%), new clothes (9.8%), and electrical goods (7.7%) were the main goods imported by the traders into the country (see Table 2). This reflects the collapse of the country's agricultural sector and manufacturing base, which created demand for food and other consumer products (Peberdy et al., 2015).

Table 2: Types of goods imported into Zimbabwe by ICBTs

Type of product	Percentage
Groceries	69.5
New clothes/shoes	9.8
Electrical goods	7.7
Household goods	2.9
Old clothes/shoes	1.9
Fresh fruit and vegetables	1.6
Meat/fish/eggs	1.5
Furniture	0.6
Crafts/curios	0.1
Other	3.1

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100%. Multiple answers were allowed as many ICBTs carried mixed loads.

Source: Peberdy et al. (2015)

Finally, the 2014 SAMP survey showed the continued importance of ICBT in the Zimbabwean economy (Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017). The study used snowball sampling strategy to identify a sample of 514 informal entrepreneurs in Harare who are involved in cross-border trade with neighboring countries. The study demonstrated that females (68%) dominate in ICBT activities and roughly three-quarters had started ICBT activities after 2006 at the peak of the Zimbabwean crisis. Despite the shortage of basic goods such as maize meal, cooking oil, and agricultural products such as milk and potatoes, the Zimbabwean government has periodically banned the importation of basic goods in a bid to protect local manufacturers. The 2014 survey was conducted after one such ban, which drove ICBTs to focus on trading clothes and footwear (87.6%) and household products (7.7%).

Although ICBT plays a critical role in the country's food economy, the Zimbabwean government has not supported this important sector. It must be noted that ICBTs depend on the country's informal economy for marketing their products. Zimbabwe's informal economy operates in a hostile environment that largely criminalizes informality and even attempts to eradicate it. Urban planning laws, which were inherited from the colonial era, such as the Town and Planning Act (1946), the Vagrants Act (1960), and the Vendors and Hawkers Bylaws (1973) require enterprises to be registered with a government authority (Ndlela, 2006). The city of Harare, for example, has on many occasions demolished vending sites used by informal traders, charging that they had been established illegally, thereby contributing to the loss of livelihoods (Bandauko et al., 2021). The Zimbabwean

government, on its part, introduced a national clean-up program called *Operation Murambatsvina* in 2005, which led to the destruction of the stalls used by informal traders (Potts, 2006; Chirisa, 2007). Furthermore, the Zimbabwean government has also intervened periodically by introducing measures that directly affect the operations of ICBTs. This includes imposing controls on certain imports as well as increasing tariffs on selected products in a bid to protect the local industry from cheap imports (Ndlela, 2006). However, as a resilient sector, ICBT has always rebounded despite these setbacks. In fact, as shown by Crush and Tawodzera (2023), ICBT has become a critical source of food for the urban poor of the country, surpassing even supermarkets and offering competitive prices for their goods due to their lower overhead costs. ICBTs imported food items such as rice and mealie meal from neighboring countries, notably Mozambique and South Africa. ICBTs earned on average US$ 639 in monthly sales, which is a decent income in Zimbabwe's economy (Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017).

In addition to operating in a harsh policy environment, ICBTs frequently experience harassment and abuse at the hands of both Zimbabwean and South African customs and immigration officials (*The Herald*, 2011). Furthermore, they were subjected to xenophobia when traveling for business abroad, especially in South Africa where hostility toward immigrants was on the rise (Jamela, 2013). ICBT has, over time, proven to be highly adaptable and capable of thriving in a difficult socio-economic and political environment. Given the important role that it plays in enhancing food security across the country, it is important to investigate how the global COVID-19 pandemic affected ICBT and how the traders responded to these challenges.

ICBT AND FOOD TRADERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in national governments worldwide adopting a wide range of measures to reduce the spread of the virus among their population. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic (Kudejira, 2020). Soon afterwards, the Zimbabwean government, through the Statutory Instrument (SI) 76 of 2020 on Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and Urban Areas of Zimbabwe) declared the pandemic a national disaster (Maulani et al., 2020). A national lockdown was ordered on 30 March 2020 through SI 83 of 2020 on Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown). The lockdown was initially meant to last for 21 days but was extended until May 2020 when some of the restrictions were eased (Dzawanda et al., 2021). The country's land borders were closed for travel deemed as non-essential until May 2021, while air travel continued, even though travelers were required to adhere to strict masking and testing requirements. Most ICBTs could not afford air travel, which meant that they were cut off from their international trading activities (Chenzi and Ndamba, 2023). Even when land borders reopened after easing of the lockdown in May 2020, the measures only supported

formal trade and ICBTs continued to be sidelined. Thus, while attempts were made to ensure that goods sold on the formal market were brought into the country by air or via land, ICBTs were excluded from these exemptions (McCartan-Demie and MacLeod, 2023).

A large number of the ICBTs were therefore forced to suspend their business operations, as the lockdown and border shutdown made it difficult for them to procure goods from outside the country (Mathe and Ndlovu, 2021). Consequently, the COVID-19-induced mobility restrictions translated to loss of employment and income for the traders. For the ICBT-dependent households, the border shutdown and lockdown meant being "'locked out' of their means of survival" (Kudejira, 2020: 6–7). In addition, SI 83 2020 ordered the closure of all businesses, except those that offered essential services, thereby excluding those in the informal economy whose business relied, to a large extent, on ICBT activities. As noted by the president of the Zimbabwe Cross Border Traders Association, Killer Zivhu, most ICBTs live a hand-to-mouth existence, and the closure of the border left them vulnerable and without money to buy food for their families and to pay rent and school fees for their children (Masiyiwa, 2020). Zivhu likened their condition to those affected by a natural disaster: "It's like they have been affected by floods and left in an open space" (Masiyiwa, 2020). A senior African analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit observed that ICBTs often support a large number of dependents, which meant that the drastic reduction in their earnings led to a sudden inability to feed their families (Phiri, 2021).

Many ICBTs operate informal businesses where they market the goods that they buy abroad (Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017). Some traders who sold food products with a longer shelf life, such as cooking oil and tinned food, resorted to the strategy of holding on to their stock, which they would sell when things normalized and providing the capital to restart their ICBT business operations (Nyabeze and Chikoko, 2021). To compound their problems even further, traders who conducted their business from stalls run by local municipal authorities were required to continue paying rent during the lockdown or risk having their stalls reallocated to other traders (Dzawanda et al., 2021).

Lack of support for the ICBTs during the lockdown resulted in rising levels of food insecurity among the traders themselves and the Zimbabwean population. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) estimated that poverty among people working in the informal economy increased by 56% in the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey by the World Bank/Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZimStat) (2020a) showed rising levels of food insecurity among the Zimbabwean population at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey collected information on a wide range of food security indicators among households for the period July 2019 (before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic) to July 2020 (four months after the country's declaration of the pandemic as a national disaster). The data shows that the proportion of households in the country experiencing

moderate and severe food insecurity rose from 42% in July 2019 to 72% in July 2020 (World Bank/ZimStat, 2020a). The disruption of the informal economy reduced household incomes and affected food flows into the country, leading to rising food insecurity among urban families. Data from World Bank/ZimStat (2020b) shows that while 5% of the sample had adopted coping strategies such as going for the whole day without eating food in July 2019, 16% had adopted this measure in July 2020 (see Table 3). Furthermore, the proportion of households that were unable to eat healthy and nutritious meals because of a lack of resources increased from 36% in 2019 to 71% in 2020.

Table 3: Food security indicators after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic

Indicator	July 2019 (%)	July 2020 (%)
Went whole day without eating food because of lack of resources	5	16
Proportion of households unable to eat healthy or nutritious food because of lack of resources	36	71

Source: Data from World Bank/ZimStat (2020b)

In a bid to cushion the people from the hardships induced by the pandemic, the Government of Zimbabwe (2020), through the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, announced a stimulus package worth ZWL$ 18 billion (equivalent to US$ 720 million using the prevailing exchange rate) (Zhanda et al., 2022). The stimulus package was aimed at providing financial support to important sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, mining, tourism, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). It offered income support of ZW$ 200 (or US$ 5) per month to vulnerable people whose incomes had been affected by the pandemic (Zhanda et al., 2022). The amount, besides being grossly inadequate to provide families with stable income and heavily politicized, benefited only 202,000 out of the targeted one million households (Chenzi and Ndamba, 2023). About US$ 20 million of the stimulus package was reserved for SMEs that are formally registered by the government, which excluded nearly all ICBTs (Kudejira, 2020). A study by Dzawanda et al. (2021) shows that none of the 33 informal traders they interviewed received any social assistance from the government, despite registering for assistance and paying taxes through a 10% presumptive tax on their rental fee of US$ 60 per month on their stalls. Thus, the traders were left to fend for themselves during a difficult time in the absence of government assistance.

The landscape in which the traders operated shifted significantly during the pandemic. The Zimbabwean government, which has a long history of antipathy toward the informal economy, decided to use the lockdown as cover for eradicating the stalls used by informal traders. The Zimbabwean government introduced SI 77 of 2020 – Public Health COVID-19 Prevention and Containment Regulations, which gave the health minister the right to

> … authorise in any local authority the evacuation, closing, alteration or, if deemed necessary, the demolition or destruction of any premises the occupation or use of which is considered likely to favour the spread or render more difficult the eradication of such disease, and define the circumstances under which compensation may be paid in respect of any premises so demolished or destroyed and the manner of fixing such compensation (GoZ, 2020: 396).

Effectively, the urban local authorities used the pandemic as an excuse to reorganize and reshape the informal sector (Mwonzora, 2022). Many of the stalls from where the informal traders operated were destroyed across the major urban areas of the country, which suggests that these actions were centrally coordinated by the national government. The destruction of these stalls eliminated a stable and reliable source of food for the local urban population and destabilized the market chains linking ICBTs, urban informal traders, and the urban poor in the country. To ensure compliance with the lockdown restrictions, the police conducted spot checks at the trading sites of the informal traders and arrested those found to be flouting the lockdown regulations (Chenzi and Ndamba, 2023). The Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA), which represents informal economy workers across the country, released a statement in April 2020 when the stall demolitions began just after the start of the lockdown. First, they indicated that they were being blamed unjustly as a site for COVID-19 transmission, noting that the war against the virus should not be a war against the livelihoods of people in the informal economy:

> Whenever there is an outbreak, either cholera or typhoid, informal economy workers and traders are blamed as the causes of such outbreaks; now we have COVID-19, they are victims again, their stalls are being destroyed. Why is the public-health war on COVID-19 pandemic becoming a war on the livelihoods of the vulnerable urban poor [who are] dependent on informal trading for their livelihoods? (ZCIEA, 2020).

Second, they complained that the destruction of the stalls occurred without warning or consultation and risked leaving most of the informal traders in poverty:

> The action just takes place as a sudden attack, with no consultation. These self-employed people rely on vending to fend for their families. Destruction of their stalls translates to the destruction of their livelihoods and a sure way of sinking them into abject poverty (ZCIEA, 2020).

ICBTS AGENCY AND SURVIVAL DURING LOCKDOWN

This section investigates some of the strategies used by ICBTs to continue their business operations amid the COVID-19 lockdowns. ICBTs were forced to adopt unorthodox means to survive during the lockdown. They saw their means of survival, cross-border trading, rendered untenable by the pandemic. At the same time, the Zimbabwean government was not responsive to their needs, excluding them from the stimulus package. The trading stalls that they used to market their commodities were destroyed by the local authorities during the lockdown. Like most Zimbabweans, they fell deeper into poverty and food insecurity. As Zhanda et al. (2022: 43) note, the dilemma that they faced during the pandemic was "either to die of hunger or the virus." One cross-border trader interviewed by Moyo (2022) referenced two pandemics, one of which was the coronavirus and the other was the closure of borders to ICBT, leading to food shortages and the death of people. Innovative ideas were needed to evade the border closure and the lockdown measures. Food shortages caused by the pandemic-induced lockdown created opportunities for traders who were able to procure goods from outside the country to make huge profits by hiking the prices of their goods. As reported by Nyabeze and Chikoko (2021), some ICBTs and businesses that managed to continue operating were able to increase their market share by as much as 20%. In an environment of scarcity, they were able to increase the prices of food items that were in short supply and high demand.

ICBTs were unable to conduct their normal cross-border trading activities during the period March 2020 to May 2021 when the land borders were closed. Some ICBTs adopted strategies that were against the law, including smuggling goods through undesignated cross points, such as the Limpopo River between Zimbabwe and South Africa (Kudejira, 2020). Informal transport operators, known as the *omalayitsha*, were critical in the movement of goods and people across the border during the pandemic. The *omalayitsha* gained prominence in the early 2000s as informal cross-border transport operators who moved people, goods, and cash remittances across the Zimbabwe–South Africa border (Thebe, 2011). They maintain strong connections with customs and border officials and are frequently able to evade the payment of customs duties on the goods that they carry. As they were not able to cross the border during the hard lockdown, they provided transport to ICBTs to undesignated crossing points at the Zimbabwe-South Africa border. Once the ICBTs crossed into South Africa, they would use local informal operators to transport them to Musina where they would buy goods for resale in Zimbabwe. However, when they got back to the border, they needed assistance to move the goods to the pick-up point on the Zimbabwean side. This created opportunities for people known as *Zalawis*, who would carry the goods on their heads across the border to the pick-up point. These informal good couriers earned their name from the truck company (*Zalawi*) that transports heavy goods across the southern African region (Moyo, 2022). The presence of *Zalawis* helped ICBTs to transport large quantities of goods that were in demand in Zimbabwe, such as cooking oil, flour, and tinned food. This opened

up new opportunities for the ICBTs. A respondent interviewed by Moyo (2022) after the border reopening said they were contemplating the continued use of the undesignated crossing point to avoid abuse and paying bribes to customs officials; besides, they could transport as many goods as they could afford using the *Zalawis*. Future research could explore the extent to which ICBTs bypass the formal border and use undesignated crossing points in a bid to avoid the complexities associated with border crossings. A study by Dzawanda et al. (2022) of 33 ICBTs in Gweru shows that more than one-third (39%) were able to continue importing goods from South Africa by crossing the border through undesignated crossing points.

Therefore, ICBTs who were able to continue with their regular cross-border operations were those able to cross the border illegally against the lockdown regulations, either through using undesignated crossing points or bribing immigration officials at the border. Evading customs and immigration officials added to the cost of conducting business, which made this an unattractive option for some traders. Hence, the lockdown and other mobility restrictions gave rise to new forms of ICBT as the traders sought alternative ways to maintain their business operations.

It must be noted that even though the land borders were closed to ICBTs and other people traveling for "non-essential" activities, vehicles registered for transporting commercial freight (mainly trucks) were allowed to cross the land borders during the lockdown. Some ICBTs were, therefore, able to use these trucks to transport their goods across the border (Mathe and Ndlovu, 2021). The use of trucks for moving goods across the border took several forms. The simplest form involved traders liaising with the truck drivers who crossed the border to bring goods for them on their return trip to Zimbabwe. A cross-border trader interviewed by Dzawanda et al. (2021: 5) used this method because it presented

> … an opportunity to make money at home during the lockdown period as it was difficult for people to get into town to buy groceries. I only sold essential foodstuffs like rice, macaroni, flour, and mealie meal from Musina because it was cheaper to buy from there; and also, these foodstuffs were in demand in residential areas.

In some cases, a complex web developed, which was mediated by social media platforms such as WhatsApp involving ICBTs, the businesses outside Zimbabwe (mainly South Africa), truck drivers, and agents based in South Africa (known as "runners") (Dzawanda et al., 2022). The border town of Musina in South Africa has developed into an important trading site for ICBTs, who take advantage of its proximity to Zimbabwe to buy goods there (IOM, 2021). During the COVID-19 lockdown, the shop owners who depend on ICBT activities were forced to develop innovative ways of maintaining contact with their ICBT customers in Zimbabwe. They formed WhatsApp groups where they advertised the goods that they had in stock (Dzawanda et al., 2022). The Zimbabwean-based traders then got in touch with

their contacts (or runners) in Musina and provided them with a list of goods they wanted. They also sent the cash for purchasing the goods either through Western Union or truck drivers. The runners then bought the goods, gave them to the truck drivers who transported them to Zimbabwe for a fee and sent the contact details of the truck drivers for communication purposes. Dzawanda et al. (2022) note that the runners received a fee of about 10–15% of the value of the goods ordered. These costs were offset by the savings made by the ICBTs on transport and lodging costs as well as the higher price fetched by the goods in Zimbabwe in an environment of food scarcity and high inflationary pressures.

An added dimension to the cross-border trading dynamic was the emergence of "groupage," which involves the organized purchase, transport, and delivery of goods in small trucks or vans. Groupages reduce the operational costs of traders, which are borne by the collective group instead of the individual trader. Group buying is nothing new among ICBTs, but it was the formalization of this process that distinguished it from other informal group-buying arrangements. According to the IOM (2021), the groupage system was introduced by the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) as a way of aggregating the ICBTs' imported goods instead of clearing them individually. ICBTs were encouraged to form buying groups (usually 10 people) and send one person with a small truck to Musina to buy goods on their behalf.

For the border authorities, groupage allowed them to monitor small-scale cross-border trade more effectively, which usually goes unrecorded, because it frequently falls below the customs exemption limit. The combined consignment of goods brought in by the trucker on behalf of the traders is treated as a commercial consignment and, therefore, is recorded as part of the cross-border trade between the two countries. This also means that the goods are subject to payment of import duties, since they are viewed as one consignment, instead of the aggregated sum of smaller consignments (McCartan-Demie and MacLeod, 2023). This added to the cost of importing goods for the traders and reduced their profit margins. It can be argued that by forcing traders to operate in this way, the Zimbabwean authorities effectively formalized cross-border trading and enabled them to collect levies that they would otherwise not have collected if the traders were operating individually. McCartan-Demie and MacLeod (2023) caution researchers who wish to use data from the pandemic period in the analysis of external trade, as it includes data from groupage trade by ICBTs.

CHANGING PATTERNS OF INFORMAL FOOD RETAIL

The pandemic had huge impacts not only on the practice of ICBT but also on the retail sales of the products they sourced from outside the country. Before the pandemic, some ICBTs marketed their goods directly to consumers or sold them to middlemen. The pandemic resulted in some ICBTs being caught up in a state of immobility, as they could not cross the borders because of the lockdown restrictions. Some ICBTs used various means (as discussed above) to bring goods into Zimbabwe, and this

meant they had to develop alternative means of marketing their products. As shown above, the Zimbabwean authorities used the guise of the pandemic to destroy the infrastructure supporting the informal economy. This meant that ICBTs had to come up with innovative ways to market their products during the lockdown.

During the first days of the lockdown, mobility was severely curtailed, and traders could not conduct their business operations even from the legal vending sites. Digital trade was one of the ways they managed to market their goods during the pandemic and emerged as a "key enabler" of trade (OECD, 2020). McCartan-Demie and MacLeod (2023) observe that digital trade grew rapidly in Africa before the pandemic, and its formal adoption expanded during the pandemic. The traders moved from conventional trading to digital trading, using platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups (Nyanga et al., 2020). Informally, traders would communicate with their clients through online platforms and arrange for payment and delivery of goods. In this way, the traders were able to conduct their business operations without breaking the lockdown regulations. Mathe and Ndlovu (2021) note that some traders were even able to expand their business operations, as the digital marketing strategies allowed them to reach new customers. Future research could explore the extent to which traders in the post-pandemic era use digital marketing tools in their business operations. This includes the current use of digital technology in providing connections with their suppliers outside the country, the agents who purchase the goods on their behalf, and truck drivers who transport goods to the country.

Although online marketing strategies provided opportunities for traders to sell their goods to consumers, customers who were not part of their marketing group were excluded from the sales and had to be reached in other ways. Immobility also resulted in a new form of food retail that emerged – mobile vendors, dubbed "vendors on wheels" by Toriro and Chirisa (2021). These traders conducted business from their vehicles that ranged from small passenger vehicles to large trucks, which they could use as a quick escape from the authorities who enforced the lockdown restrictions. An added advantage was that the vehicles offered traders a means to test the market in different spaces and quickly move away from places with limited demand for their products. The end of the pandemic restrictions presents research opportunities to investigate the long-term sustainability of "vending on wheels," as informal traders return to their traditional vending spaces.

GENDERING ICBT FOOD TRADE DURING THE PANDEMIC

ICBT in Zimbabwe is a highly gendered activity. Data from ZimStat (2023) shows that there are more women (87.1%) than men (84.5%) employed in informal employment. The 2008 border monitoring survey by Peberdy et al. (2016) show that women ICBTs outnumbered men at all border posts monitored, including at the Zimbabwe–South Africa border at Beitbridge (54%) and at the Zimbabwe–Zambia border at Chirundu (67%). Therefore, it is not surprising that female ICBTs were more affected by the

lockdown and other pandemic restrictions than their male counterparts. Ironically, women ICBTs had been forced into trading activities because of lack of opportunities in the Zimbabwean economy. Women often face serious obstacles to getting decent jobs, leaving most of them stuck in low-wage and insecure jobs (Maunganidze, 2020). For these reasons, the lockdowns affected women's incomes and widened the existing inequalities between men and women (Chikazhe et al., 2020; IOM, 2021).

Schools in Zimbabwe were closed from 24 March 2020 to 8 September 2021 during the lockdown period. Women generally bear most of the caregiving responsibilities among families in Zimbabwe and the pandemic meant that they bore most of the burden of childcare after the closure of schools (Dzingirai et al., 2021). This limited their ability to participate in the coping strategies adopted by their male counterparts to beat the pandemic restrictions on trading. Not surprisingly, the Southern Africa Trust (2021: 20) underscores that the "pandemic has placed women in the informal economy between a rock and a hard place, the need to earn an income on the one hand and ensuring minimal risk of exposure to the virus on the other."

The border closure during the lockdown drove some ICBTs to engage in illegal border crossings, and this had important gender implications. Moyo (2022) and the IOM (2021) highlight reports of women being sexually harassed and abused by criminal elements during illegal border crossings. In addition, gender-based violence against women also increased during this time, as couples were spending most of their time together in an environment marked by declining access to income-generating activities (Magezi and Manzanga, 2020; Mashapure et al., 2021). Phiri (2021) interviewed a mother of three, whose ICBT business provided the bulk of the household income and whose husband worked as a commuter omnibus driver. When the pandemic restrictions led to the border shutdown and suspension of public transport operation, tensions increased in the household, which caused her to apply for a restraining order because of the emotional and physical abuse caused by her husband.

Although the pandemic provided opportunities for the adoption of digital marketing strategies, there were significant gender differences in the adoption of these technologies. Zhanda et al. (2022) have shown that the "gender digital gap" or the lack of computer knowledge among female ICBTs, resulted in a large number of them not taking advantage of digital marketing tools to market their products during lockdown. Although widespread adoption of cellphones has improved access to the Internet in the country, the lack of knowledge of the use of digital marketing tools has limited the ability of women to take advantage of this opportunity.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF ICBT

This paper demonstrated the important role of ICBTs in the importation as well as the retail of food in Zimbabwe. A large number of ICBTs either sell these commodities directly to consumers via their own informal stalls or sell them to informal traders in

the country. Moreover, these traders are able to sell their goods at lower prices than those charged at supermarkets as a result of their limited overhead costs (Tawodzera and Chikanda, 2017). ICBT can arguably serve as an agent for women's empowerment, as it offers them an opportunity to earn stable incomes in an environment of limited formal employment opportunities.

This paper illustrated that the border closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the functioning of the ICBTs in Zimbabwe, particularly their incomes. However, the ICBTs displayed their agency and resilience to the challenges that the pandemic presented. They were able to use alternative means to procure goods from other countries, using both personal and digital networks. This paper demonstrated that the adoption of these coping strategies was not applied uniformly across the spectrum of ICBT, and that male ICBTs adopted digital marketing strategies at a faster rate than their female counterparts. Moreover, crossing the border at undesignated crossing points to beat the border shutdown exposed female ICBTs to added risks such as theft, harassment and sexual abuse. Consequently, female ICBTs faced severe challenges in responding to the border shutdown and the lockdown caused by the pandemic. Future studies could seek to investigate whether some of the adaptations caused by the pandemic, such as the use of digital technologies in both the purchase of goods from outside the country and their sale to customers in Zimbabwe, have become an established practice.

Despite the positive contribution of ICBTs toward making food available on the market during a time of scarcity, the urban local authorities demonstrated their unwillingness to accommodate food trading in the city's urban landscape. In fact, they used the pandemic restrictions as cover to destroy the stalls and other infrastructure used by informal traders to market their commodities. This raises questions on the right of poor people's access to the city (Lefebvre, 1974); they were barred from pursuing their livelihood strategies, while formal retail activities were permitted. Clearly, the contribution of ICBTs to employment generation and food security is not widely recognized by the policymakers as well as its linkage to the country's informal economy. Rather than viewing ICBTs as a residual sector of the economy, policymakers should recognize their overall contributions to both the country's economy and to society.

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Sustainable Development Goals and Food Remittances: COVID-19 Lockdowns, Digital Transformation, Lessons, and Policy Reflections from the South Africa–Zimbabwe Corridor

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Abstract

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to address global challenges like food insecurity, poverty, inequality, and economic growth. Remittances are crucial in achieving these goals, especially in developing countries. By directly supporting households, remittances help reduce poverty and food insecurity, improve access to healthcare and education and bolster financial stability. Strengthening policies to facilitate safe, affordable remittances aligns with SDG targets and empowers families to break the poverty cycle, contributing to sustainable development at the community level. Recent migration studies reveal that food remittances are essential to achieving the SDG goals, mainly poverty reduction at the household level and the nutrition security of poor households in Southern Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted the mechanisms and pathways through which international migrants transfer food remittances to their home countries. In the Global South, recent studies have highlighted the expansion of digital-mobile technology. However, in Southern Africa, digital food remittances are still under-researched. This paper is based on a mixed-methods study whose aim is to contribute to the academic and policy discussion on food remittances by examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns introduced by the South African and Zimbabwean governments on the nature and volume of cross-border food remittance flows between the two countries. The article begins by assessing the characteristics of food remittance transfers during the pandemic. It then highlights key lessons learned regarding the role of various transfer channels amid significant disruptions. Finally, the discussion pivots to the implications of mobile and digital technology-based channels for the food remittance market, which primarily operates within informal financial ecosystems. This examination underscores the transformative potential of technological advancements in reshaping

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the dynamics of remittance flows during times of crisis. A key finding is that digital-mobile technologies in cross-border food remittances promote financial and digital inclusion and offer swift, accessible (particularly during the pandemic-induced disruptions of informal channels), reliable, and convenient ways to remit food, which is crucial for food and nutrition security. The insights gained from this paper underscore the need for policymakers to support and enhance the integration of digital-mobile technologies within the food remittance framework. By doing so, stakeholders can ensure improved food and nutrition security for families reliant on these vital transfers, thus contributing to broader socio-economic stability in the region.

Keywords: food remittances, digital technology, mobile transfers, food security, COVID-19, Sustainable Development Goals, Zimbabwean diaspora support

INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a universal call to action to tackle some of the world's most pressing challenges, including poverty reduction, inequality, and sustainable economic growth (Allen et al., 2018). Launched by the United Nations (UN) in 2015, the 17 SDGs provide a roadmap for countries to achieve a fairer, more sustainable future by 2030. Goal 1 focuses on eradicating poverty in all forms, recognizing that lifting individuals out of poverty improves overall well-being and economic stability. Goal 10 aims to reduce inequalities within and among countries, promoting social inclusion and justice (Esiri et al., 2024). Additionally, Goal 8 emphasizes sustainable economic growth by fostering decent work opportunities, entrepreneurship, and innovation (Zakari et al., 2022). Together, these targets aim to create resilient, inclusive societies where prosperity and development are accessible to all.

For the most vulnerable segments of society, remittances serve as a catalyst for change and are essential to achieving the SDGs (Malecki, 2021; Burger, 2023; Barkat et al., 2024; Mabrouk, 2024). According to the 2021 International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) report, remittances help achieve SDGs 1–8, 12, and 13. Since a 10% increase in per capita remittances could reduce the percentage of a nation's population living in poverty by 3.5%, this impact includes the eradication of poverty (Burger, 2023:1). Additional effects include eliminating hunger, promoting health and well-being, ensuring clean water and sanitation, promoting gender equality, and providing affordable and clean energy. Remittances also support climate action, promote responsible production and consumption, guarantee decent work, and boost the economy (Barkat et al., 2024). Remittances can also provide financial resources during economic shocks, crises, and pandemics.

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) officially declared the COVID-19 crisis as a "pandemic" following a sharp surge in cases and deaths globally. In response, countries across the Global North and South implemented public health lockdowns and restrictions to mitigate the virus'

spread and minimize its devastating impact (Ataguba, 2020; Benítez et al., 2020; Primc and Slabe-Erker, 2020; Fauzi and Paiman, 2021; Onyeaka et al., 2021). South Africa and Zimbabwe were no exceptions. In March 2020, the Disaster Management Act and the COVID-19 Prevention, Containment, and Treatment Order were enacted, respectively, to contain and mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. The measures disrupted both domestic and international mobility. The lockdowns, mobility restrictions and disruptions drastically affected migrants and the transfer of remittances, especially the use of informal channels (Crush et al., 2021; Sithole et al., 2022, 2024a; Crush and Tawodzera, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the channeling of remittances, a crucial source of cash, food, and other goods for many poor households in the Global South. Migrants were compelled to rely on formal and digital-mobile remittance channels due to mobility restrictions, lockdowns, travel bans, border closures, and limited access to informal channels, commonly based on in-person transactions. These disruptions arose from public health measures implemented to contain the spread of the virus, including social distancing, curfews, mobility restrictions, travel bans and border closures. With informal channels constrained, many migrants adopted digital platforms and mobile technologies for remittances, allowing them to evade physical barriers and continue supporting families despite the pandemic and lockdown limitations. The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were initially expected to significantly reduce the flow of remittances globally.

However, contrary to these predictions, remittance flows demonstrated remarkable resilience in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, with both formal (including digital) and informal channels playing a considerable role. According to the World Bank (2021) data, in 2020, remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries recorded a modest 1.7% decrease to $549 billion. In some regions in the Global South, by "defying the odds" in Asia and Africa, countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Comoros, The Gambia, Kenya, and Pakistan in 2020 all recorded an upsurge in remittance flows of more than 10% compared to the previous year (Kpodar et al., 2023). Similarly, Mbiba and Mupfumira (2022) note that migrants from Zimbabwe were "rising to the occasion" by sending remittances consistently during the pandemic. For example, they show that Zimbabwean migrants in the United Kingdom (UK) transferred more remittances than in previous years, changed their consumption behaviors, worked extended hours, and even took out loans to support families and relatives back home.

In addition to cash remittances, studies highlight the significance of in-kind transfers – such as food – that played a crucial role during the pandemic. For instance, Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa transfer food remittances to support migrant-sending households, emphasizing the importance of non-cash remittances (Sithole et al., 2022, 2024a; Sithole, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies, enhancing automation and digitization in daily life, from remote work and virtual communication to contact tracing and tracking COVID-19

infections (Datta and Guermond, 2020). These shifts demonstrate how the pandemic disrupted informal remittance pathways and enhanced digital innovation in financial transactions and virtual interactions. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns significantly disrupted food systems, supply chains and consumers' conventional purchasing habits globally.

Mobility restrictions, curfews, and restricted access to familiar food sources, such as supermarkets, food outlets, vendors, and informal markets, increased the adoption of contactless online food purchasing. Consumers increasingly depended on digital platforms, mobile apps, and online services to purchase essential goods. Businesses, in turn, adopted e-procurement systems to connect with farmers and processors and expanded e-commerce operations to meet changing consumer demands (Reardon et al., 2021a, 2021b). In Asian countries such as China and Thailand, the lockdowns and the closure of wet markets drove the rapid growth of digital commerce, with increased use of smartphones and mobile apps facilitating online food purchases through the use of food delivery apps (Chotigo and Kadono, 2021; Liang et al., 2022). Similarly, in Latin America and Africa, public health regulations and amplified distress about safety and hygiene accelerated the adoption of online food buying and delivery apps (Zanetta et al., 2021; Bannor and Amponsah, 2024).

In South Africa, consumers embraced the online services of retail supermarkets and engaged more frequently in online shopping to cope with the pandemic and restricted access to physical stores (Naicker et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic considerably disrupted informal remittance channels, accelerating the adoption of financial technology (fintech) and increasing the use of digital remittance channels. Ratha et al. (2021), using World Bank data, show that international remittances transmitted via mobile devices rose to US$ 12.7 billion in 2020, indicating a 65% increase compared to 2019. Dinarte-Diaz et al. (2022) indicate that remittances were strikingly transferred during the pandemic "neither by land nor by sea" but via banks, digital wallets, mobile money, e-money accounts, and other formal financial channels.

Digital remittance platforms, including online services, mobile apps, and smartphone technologies have transformed how remittances are transferred. Digital and mobile technologies have secure, speedy, dependable, and affordable services to send remittances compared to banking systems, enabling real-time transactions that are accessible and efficient. Proponents of fintech innovations and telecommunication companies highlight that digital transactions are not only faster and more efficient but also cheaper, ensuring that more funds reach recipients conveniently (Datta and Guermond, 2020). The expanding prominence of digital remittances was underscored on the UN's International Day of Family Remittances (IDFR), observed annually on 16 June. In 2023, the theme emphasized the role of digital and financial inclusion in enhancing the impact of remittances and helping migrant families achieve their SDGs (UN, 2023). The IDFR celebrates the critical contributions of

migrants toward improving the livelihoods of their families and acknowledges how digital remittance pathways support households by making financial services more inclusive and accessible, especially in rural, remote, and underserved areas.

Research highlights the crucial role of mobile and digital technologies in remittance services, particularly in promoting financial inclusion among vulnerable groups, such as the unbanked, undocumented migrants, and communities in rural or remote African regions (Mutsonziwa and Maposa, 2016; Nyanhete, 2017; Kitimbo, 2021; Tembo and Okoro, 2021). Remittance transfers, in the context of this study, have become increasingly significant, particularly in the context of the rising migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa in the last two decades. The increased migration has been caused by a mix of socio-economic predicaments in Zimbabwe, including high unemployment, currency instability, hyperinflation, declining agricultural outputs, food insecurity, and political instability. Recent data have indicated that South Africa hosts an estimated 2.4 million international migrants, with over one million Zimbabwean migrants, making Zimbabwe the largest migrant-sending country in South Africa (Stats SA, 2023).

Against the backdrop of Zimbabwe's economic crisis, remittances from South Africa have become essential for households, enabling access to basic needs, such as food, healthcare, education, housing, and clothing (Tevera and Maphosa, 2007; Chikanda, 2009a; Mukwedeya, 2011; Mbiba and Mupfumira, 2022). Remittances improve well-being and livelihoods and act as a cushion for families facing severe financial poverty. While cash remittances have received considerable research and policy attention, food remittances have been relatively under-researched and neglected (Crush and Caesar, 2018, 2020). Crush and Caesar (2018, 2020) emphasize the pressing need to better understand food remittances in Africa and examine them, focusing on the drivers, characteristics, and impacts.

This article seeks to contribute to the debates on the SDGs, migrant remittances, and food by examining the impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the digitalization of food remittance transfers. It examines three key areas: the characteristics of food remittances during the pandemic, lessons learned from the pandemic and emerging transfer channels, and the implications of evolving digital technology on the predominantly informal food remittance market. The article concludes with a call for further research and policy focus on the synergies between migration, food remittances, and digital-mobile technologies.

COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS: POLICY RESPONSES BY THE SOUTH AFRICAN AND ZIMBABWEAN GOVERNMENTS

The COVID-19 pandemic declaration in March 2020 was followed by a series of lockdowns, travel bans, mobility restrictions, and border closures imposed by South African and Zimbabwean governments, which disrupted the movement of people and goods between the two countries (Crush et al., 2021b; Sithole et al., 2023; 2024a). The disruptions notably limited access to informal remittance channels,

prompting many migrants to up-take digital-mobile and formal channels to transmit remittances home. Crush and Si (2020) and Paganini et al. (2020) argue that pandemic containment measures significantly affected national and transnational food supply chains and local and regional food systems in the Global South, further straining informal food markets.

The first confirmed COVID-19 case in South Africa was reported on 5 March 2020, when a South African returned from Italy (RSA, 2020a). By 15 March, the case count had risen to 61, and with the cases predicted to rise, the president declared a national state of disaster under the Disaster Management Act. In the same month, the National Coronavirus Command Council was established to spearhead containment and mitigation measures, including travel bans, border and seaport closures, visa denials and cancellations, school/educational institutions shutdowns, and restrictions on large gatherings (RSA, 2020b). As cases continued to rise, reaching 402 by 23 March 2020, a 21-day nationwide lockdown was implemented from midnight on 26 March 2020, to limit the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact.

The lockdown measures in South Africa included strict prohibitions on inter-provincial travel, curfews, quarantines for travelers from high-risk countries, and suspension of international flights. Entry restrictions were imposed on non-South Africans from high-risk regions. Additional restrictions included canceling mass celebrations and public events, limitations on alcohol sales, and the closure of non-essential businesses, shops, bars, restaurants, and recreational spaces. By 27 March 2020, COVID-19 cases had reached 1,170, and the first virus-related death was reported (RSA, 2020c). Only essential workers and services such as healthcare, emergency, security, municipal services, food production, supply, distribution, or allocation were allowed to continue operations (DIRCO, 2020).

On 21 April 2020, the South African government announced a R500 billion social and economic relief package to support vulnerable communities during the lockdown. However, this aid primarily targeted South African citizens and permanent residents, leaving undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers without significant support (Mukumbang et al., 2020; Crush and Sithole, 2024a; 2024b). From April 2020 to June 2022, South Africa fluctuated between alert levels 1 and 5 to manage COVID-19 risk, with level 1 indicating low virus spread and high health system readiness and level 2 indicating moderate spread with sustained health system readiness (RSA, 2020d). Alert level 3 indicated a moderate COVID-19 spread with moderate health system readiness. Alert level 4 suggested a moderate to high spread and a low to moderate readiness of the health system, while alert level 5 represented a high COVID-19 spread with low health system capacity.

The South African government (RSA, 2020d) outlined the objectives of each alert level as follows: alert level 1 allowed most activities to resume, with safety measures in place, while health guidelines were to be adhered to at all times and prepared the public for potential escalation. Alert level 2 focused on physical distancing and limited social and leisure activities to prevent case resurgence. Alert

level 3 restricted various activities, such as in social and workplaces, to prevent high transmission risks. Alert level 4 was intended to lessen community outbreaks through strict safety measures, permitting limited economic activities. The last category, alert level 5, enforced strict measures to save lives and control virus spread. As of 3 October 2023, South Africa had recorded over 102,500 COVID-19 deaths, more than 4 million confirmed cases, conducted over 21 million tests, and administered 38 million vaccine doses (Johns Hopkins University, 2023a), reflecting the impact and the extensive response to the pandemic.

In Zimbabwe, the first confirmed COVID-19 case was reported on 20 March 2020, when a resident of Victoria Falls returned from the UK. The first COVID-19-related death was recorded soon after, involving a local journalist who had traveled from the United States and was the country's second confirmed case. With a rise in cases, the government implemented the COVID-19 Prevention, Containment, and Treatment Order and initiated a 21-day lockdown (30 March to 19 April 2020). The government also established a National COVID-19 Response Taskforce to monitor pandemic developments, coordinate responses, and mobilize resources to mitigate the crisis' impact (Maulani et al., 2020). The lockdown-imposed restrictions on non-essential activities and gatherings, limited public movement (except for personnel providing essential services), school closures, and closed borders and airports mandated mask-wearing and the establishment of isolation centers (Maulani et al., 2020).

Essential services, including emergency and hospital services, sanitation, state security, electricity and water services, food and retail outlets, agricultural suppliers, communication, money-transfer and exchange services and aid/humanitarian personnel, were exempted from lockdown restrictions (Maulani et al., 2020; Murendo et al., 2021). Zimbabweans returning from abroad were allowed entry but required to undergo a 14-day quarantine upon arrival. As of 3 October 2023, Zimbabwe had recorded over 5,600 deaths and more than 264,000 confirmed cases, with 12.6 million vaccine doses administered (Johns Hopkins University, 2023b), highlighting the efforts undertaken to manage the pandemic's impact.

DIGITAL-MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES, FOOD REMITTANCES, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Digital, mobile, and financial technologies have transformed financial transactions, changing user experiences and services. The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions in established informal channels and hastened evolutions in financial technology (fintech) and the adoption of digital and mobile services. According to Agur et al. (2020), digital financial services are comprised of financial tools such as remittances, payments, and credit, accessible through digital and mobile pathways. These services include traditional instruments like credit and debit cards (primarily offered through banks) and new innovations built on digital platforms, cloud computing, and distributed ledger technologies, such as mobile transactions, peer-to-peer (P2P)

applications, and crypto-assets. Emara and Zhang (2021) argue that fintech is a crucial driver of financial inclusion, with evolving technologies like mobile money (enabling transactions without a bank account) and mobile banking (facilitating swift digital transactions on mobile devices). Advancements and expansions of digital-mobile payment systems, Internet-based technologies and online money-transfer services have significantly enhanced financial inclusion and access (Abdul Mannan and Farhana, 2023).

Emara and Zhang (2021) argue that advancements in a country's digital ecosystem can facilitate remittances by providing a convenient digital pathway for people, businesses, and governments to process or receive funds. Critical steps to strengthening the digital ecosystem include investing in human capital, expanding Internet access in educational institutions, increasing investments in digital media, mobile data, and Internet services and encouraging the use of electronic banking across consumers, businesses, and governments (Emara and Zhang, 2021). According to the World Bank (2021), digital remittances are transmitted through self-assisted or online payment systems. They can be received in transaction accounts provided by banks or non-bank entities, such as mobile money and e-money accounts available at post offices. Similarly, Agur et al. (2020) describe digital remittances as cross-border transfers facilitated through the Internet by migrants, providing a streamlined alternative to traditional channels.

The rise of digital and mobile technologies has revolutionized how international migrants send cross-border remittances and how beneficiaries receive them. Research highlights that digital and mobile remittances are user-friendly, fast, secure, convenient, and low-cost (Merritt, 2011; Siegel and Fransen, 2013; Ahmad, Green and Jiang, 2020). The World Bank notes that digital remittance channels are generally more cost-effective than conventional bank transfers (Ratha et al., 2021). RemitSCOPE (2022) notes that digital remittances, electronic transactions and mobile money are expanding in the Global South, for example, across Africa, enhancing financial access and digital inclusion for migrants and their families. Governments in several African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, and Liberia, have encouraged banks to reduce or waive transaction fees and increase daily transaction limits to support mobile money and digital financial services (Machasio, 2020). A core objective of fintech is the financial inclusion of vulnerable communities. Ardic et al. (2022) observe that digitalizing remittance services offers innovative ways to enhance financial inclusion, particularly for undocumented migrants and persons with limited digital literacy.

The evolution of cell phone banking and digital-mobile technologies in remittance sending is transformational in the Global South; it enhances financial and digital access and supports economic resilience in marginalized communities (such as unbanked communities and low-income populations). Across regions, including Africa, Asia, the Pacific, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean, investments in digital ecosystems, electronic payments, and mobile

money have increased financial inclusion and made remittances faster, safer, and more convenient for both senders and recipients (Emara and Zhang, 2021; Hahm et al., 2021; Tembo and Okoro, 2021). In Africa, for instance, digital financial services have enabled previously excluded groups, such as those in the informal sector, low-income earners, the unemployed, and youth, to access financial services, thereby boosting digital financial inclusion (Mpofu and Mhlanga, 2022).

In Africa, the growth of digital-mobile financial services has pioneered advanced pathways for remitting and is accessible to informal traders and undocumented migrants who are typically excluded (Tembo and Okoro, 2021). One prominent example of this shift is M-Pesa, Kenya's mobile wallet system, which has set a high standard in Africa and catalyzed the development of similar mobile money services across the continent (Agur et al., 2020; Emara and Zhang, 2021). Launched in 2007 by the Safaricom-Vodafone Group, M-Pesa, meaning "mobile cash" in Swahili, has rapidly gained popularity, supporting both micro-financing and mobile-based money transfers (Hughes and Lonie, 2007; Kingiri and Fu, 2019).

In Southern Africa, the World Bank (2018) notes that undocumented migrants can access digital and mobile remittance services for low-value transactions without formal identification, such as South Africa's policy allowing transfers under a daily limit of R3,000 and a monthly limit of R10,000. In Zimbabwe, mobile banking platforms such as EcoCash, EcoCash Diaspora, and Mukuru have provided rural and urban populations with affordable, reliable, and secure financial services (Mutsonziwa and Maposa, 2016; Gukurume and Mahiya, 2020; Cirolia et al., 2022), making these services not just accessible but also affordable for individuals lacking access to conventional banking systems. This underscores the impact of digital financial solutions on financial inclusion in the region.

Groceries and food remittances are generally transferred through informal channels (non-market pathways). However, recent studies by Sithole (2022, 2023) and Sithole et al. (2022, 2023, 2024a) highlight the emerging flows of cross-border food remittances using mobile and digital technology channels, illustrating a noteworthy shift in the remittance services in sub-Saharan Africa. Fintech companies such as Mukuru Groceries, Malaicha, Ahoyi Africa, Senditoo, Tinokunda, and Shumba Africa now offer services that facilitate the transfer of food, groceries, and other goods through digital services. The services are accessible via smartphones and mobile devices. This digital approach is particularly beneficial for undocumented migrants and informal traders who may lack formal identification (such as ID, passports, and visas) but still wish to engage in remittance transactions.

New fintech entrants like Mukuru and Malaicha have increasingly focused on the South Africa–Zimbabwe remittance corridor, a vibrant and growing market. The name "Malaicha" itself reflects the long-standing term "omalayishas" or "malayishas," which is commonly used to describe informal couriers or transporters of cash, goods, and people, often using buses and vans, along the South Africa–Zimbabwe route. The SiNdebele term "malayitsha" translates to those who carry a heavy load

or who load and carry goods, underscoring the importance of these couriers within migrant communities (Nyamunda, 2014; Nzima, 2017). Many Zimbabwean migrants regularly rely on malayishas to send cash and goods back home to their families and relatives (Nyoni, 2012; Thebe, 2015).

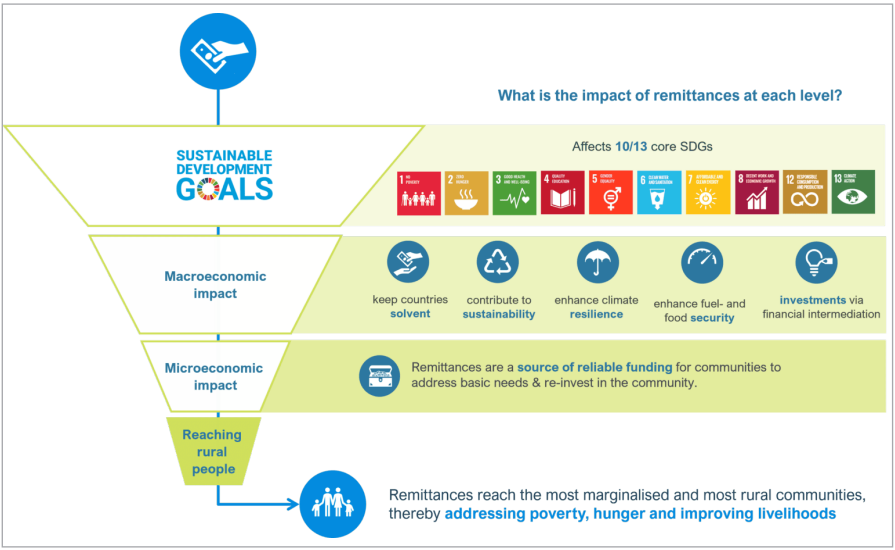
The Malaicha company has further emphasized the value of digital platforms for sending food, groceries, and other essentials, highlighting these channels as more secure, reliable, and convenient alternatives for Zimbabwean migrants supporting families back home:

> For Zimbabweans who are far from home, ensuring that their family is fed and looked after is one of their most fundamental goals. This is often easier said than done when faced with costly solutions, the potential for damaged goods and uncertainty of whether groceries may even reach their destination. Malaicha.com has revolutionized the way Zim¬babweans based in South Africa are able to send goods and groceries to their loved ones (Santosdiaz, 2020).

The digital transformation offers secure remittance alternatives and provides solutions that align with improving service efficiency and security. Cross-border remittances and digital-mobile technology solutions have enormous potential to address several SDG targets. The SDGs focus on sustainability, economic development, social inclusion, environmental issues, and global partnership (De Jong and Vijge, 2021). Rooted in the United Nations's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 17 SDGs encompass goals such as no poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), good health and well-being (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9).

The SDGs are greatly aided by remittances, especially in developing nations. Families directly benefit from remittances, which increase access to necessities like food, healthcare, and education, thereby reducing poverty. In general, remittances contribute to SDGs as follows: Goal 1, no poverty; Goal 2, zero hunger; Goal 3, good health and well-being; Goal 4, quality education; Goal 5, gender equality; Goal 6, clean water and sanitation; Goal 7, affordable and clean energy; Goal 8, decent work and economic growth; Goal 12, responsible consumption and production; and Goal 13, climate action. The importance of effective, reasonably priced channels for remittances cannot be overstated, as they are potent for promoting several SDGs and sustainable development when effective, reasonably priced channels are made available. Figure 1 shows the contribution of remittances to 10 key SDGs.

Figure 1: Contribution of remittances to 10 key SDGs



Source: Burger (2023: 2) from https://www.un.org/en/desa/sdg-blog

In the Global South, remittances often serve as a lifeline for vulnerable migrant-sending households, particularly in countries facing economic challenges, including poverty, inequality, and food insecurity. The cash and food transfers are crucial for accessing essential needs such as food, healthcare, housing, education, and clothing. Adopting and using digital-mobile technologies for food remittances ensure rapid, accessible, and reliable response to hunger, especially during pandemics such as COVID-19, economic shocks, and emergencies (Sithole et al., 2022, 2023). Therefore, digital-mobile technology-based channels for food remittances, with their convenient and rapid response to hunger, food shortages, and food insecurity, can contribute to attaining zero hunger (SDG 2), eradicating poverty (SDG 1), improving health and well-being (SDG 3), reducing inequality (SDG 10) and other related SDGs. These technologies assist remittance senders and beneficiaries in shrinking inequalities, improving food and nutrition security and presenting sustainable strategies.

METHODOLOGY

The research is based on data collected in 2020 in Cape Town, South Africa. South African cities, such as Cape Town, are major destinations for international migrants because of economic and job opportunities. The research team undertook primary data collection in the southern and northern suburbs of Cape Town. These suburbs include Bellville, Claremont, Kenilworth, Rondebosch, and Wynberg. The selected neighborhoods are strategic localities for international migrants because they have

facilities such as economic and employment prospects, as well as social, residential, educational, and entrepreneurial opportunities and services. To ensure diversity in the study, the participants were from diverse backgrounds: experience, education, occupation, age, gender, and location. The research is based on a mixed-methods approach. Thus, the researchers conducted a questionnaire survey of 100 participants for the quantitative part and 10 in-depth interviews for the qualitative section. The research team adopted STATA statistical software to analyze the quantitative data and used a thematic technique for qualitative data analysis. In the study, the researchers adhered to all ethical protocols, such as acquiring ethical clearance, being granted permission, informed consent, and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

CROSS-BORDER FOOD REMITTANCES FROM SOUTH AFRICA TO ZIMBABWE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Background and demographic information of food-remitting migrants

The demographic profile of the 100 food-remitting Zimbabwean migrants who participated in this research is summarized in Table 1. The profile of the participants demonstrated widespread diversity in terms of age (ranging from 23 to 60 years), gender, marital status, dependents (the majority had at least two), education (77% had university qualifications), and occupation (office workers, teachers, lecturers, health professionals, and blue-collar workers – including informal traders and domestic workers). Table 1 shows that a majority of the participants (75%) were de facto household heads and primary earning members of their households. The in-depth interviews were based on accounts from 10 Zimbabwean migrants (six males and four females), and their ages ranged between 27 and 59. The participants' occupations included office workers, teachers, lecturers, postgraduate students, gardeners, waiters (servers), and bartenders.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Key categories	Share (%)
Gender	
Female	50
Male	50
Age	
30 years and under	20
31–45 years	69
46 years and above	11
Marital status	
Married	45
Single	42
Divorced/widowed	13

Main household earning member	
Self	75
Husband	15
Wife	10
Dependents	
None	13
1–2	41
3–4	42
More than 4	4
Educational background	
Primary	6
Secondary	17
University	77
Occupation/profession	
Office worker	18
Student	22
Waiter/server	16
Bartender	12
Domestic worker	8
Health professional	6
Teacher	6
Informal trader	6
Business owner/entrepreneur	4
Lecturer	2

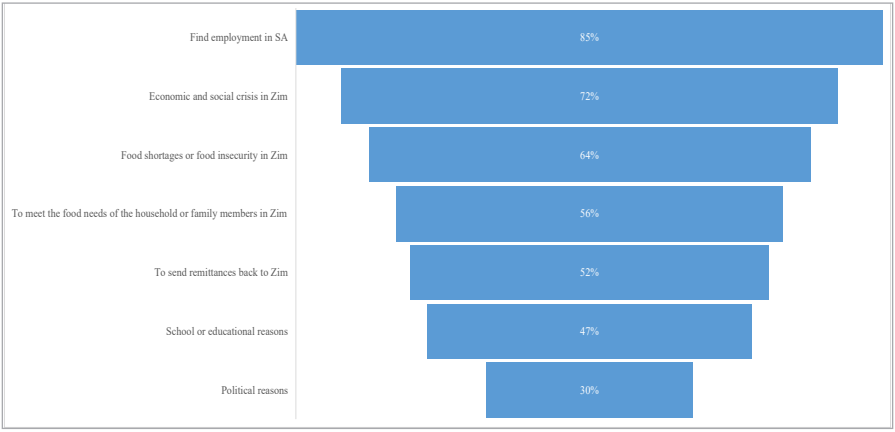
Source: Authors' own compilation (2024)

Migration drivers and motivations to remit food

The research conducted by Sithole et al. (2022, 2023, 2024a), alongside the studies by Crush and Tawodzera (2017), Sithole and Dinbabo (2016), Crush et al. (2015), and Crush and Tevera (2010), underscores the multifaceted nature of the drivers of mass emigration from Zimbabwe over the past two decades. These investigations identify socio-economic and political factors as pivotal influences precipitating this phenomenon. The reasons are consistent with the findings in this study, where the deteriorating economic conditions, socio-economic crises and political instability were the drivers of the mass departure from Zimbabwe (see Figure 2). The majority (85%) of the participants left Zimbabwe to search for employment in South Africa. In contrast, several other participants (72%) emigrated to flee the economic and social predicament experienced by Zimbabwe since the 1990s (hyperinflation rates, high food prices, currency instability, unemployment, and periodic droughts). Two-thirds (64%) stated they emigrated because of the food challenges in Zimbabwe, including prevalent circumstances of food insecurity and food shortages.

More than half of the survey participants indicated that they departed Zimbabwe to seek economic and income-generating opportunities that would enable them to send back remittances (52%) and meet the food needs of the migrant-sending families and households (56%). Other migration drivers included school or educational reasons (47%) and evading political hostility (30%). Figure 2 shows the reasons why migrants left Zimbabwe.

Figure 2: Reasons why migrants left Zimbabwe



Source: Authors' own compilation (2024)

Survey participants were asked to indicate their primary determinants for transferring food to Zimbabwe (see Table 2). A significant proportion, comprising 43% of respondents, reported that their primary reason was to satisfy requests for food from households and family members residing in Zimbabwe. Additionally, one-third (33%) of the participants indicated that their motivations stemmed from the scarcity of essential commodities and the elevated prices of food items in local markets in Zimbabwe. Almost a quarter (24%) of participants sent food to alleviate the food insecurity of their families and households in Zimbabwe.

Table 2: Reasons for remitting food

Principal reason for remitting food	Frequency (%)
Requests from family or household members	43
Food items are in short supply and expensive	33
Household or family food insecurity	24

Source: Authors' own compilation (2024)

In the in-depth interviews, the participants emphasized the crucial motivations for food remitting. As one Zimbabwean migrant explained, "I am influenced by

the shortages [in Zimbabwe], you know, they [relatives] communicate with me sometimes to say, 'We have run out of basics' … ." Another Zimbabwean migrant stated, "My reasons for sending back food are mainly based on the requests that my family makes." From these accounts, it is apparent that the adverse economic situations in Zimbabwe and personal obligations to family members and migrant-sending households were the primary motivations for transferring food remittances.

Food items and frequency of remitting

The prolonged economic challenges (including the food crisis) in Zimbabwe are characterized by widespread food insecurity, food shortages, hyperinflation or skyrocketing food prices, non-compliance with price control measures, considerable and recurrent disruptions in regular food distribution and circulation processes and ravaged national and local food systems (Ramachandran et al., 2022; Moyo 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns, travel bans, and prohibition of public gatherings in Zimbabwe limited the regular operation of agricultural extension services, food supply (transportation of agricultural produce to markets) and disrupted agricultural and food markets (Muvhuringi et al., 2021; Mapfumo et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown phases in Zimbabwe were related to surges in food prices, disrupted diet and consumption patterns, and reduction in dietary diversity (Matsungo and Chopera, 2020; Murendo et al., 2021). Thus, cross-border food transfers provide an essential source of food and groceries to cushion households back in Zimbabwe with limited access to food or during periods of economic shocks and food shortages. Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017) also show that for many cross-border traders and migrants, it is substantially cheaper to purchase goods and groceries in South Africa and transport them to Zimbabwe. This study illustrates that Zimbabwean migrants transfer a wide range of food and grocery items, including staple foods in Zimbabwe, grain-based foodstuffs, starchy foods, protein and fat-based foods, fruit and vegetables, dairy products, sugar-based products, beverages, and perishable and non-perishable foods (see Table 3).

Table 3: Remitted food items and frequency

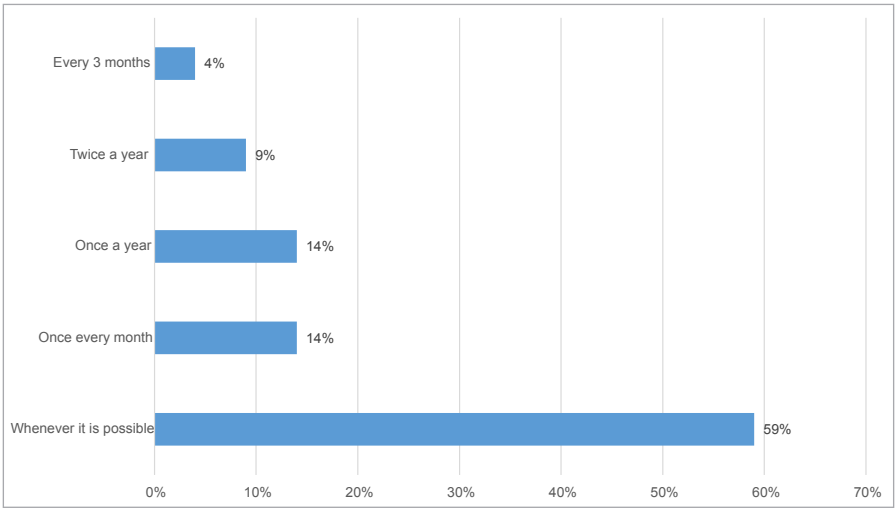
Food type	Frequency (%)
Cooking oil	68
Rice	62
Sugar	57
Mealie meal	50
Beans	46
Drinks or juice	45
Peanut butter	45
Meat	41
Flour	40

Salt	39
Jam	38
Milk	31
Kapenta (dried small fish)	29
Soups and spices	28
Tinned tomatoes and onions	27
Nuts	26
Cereals	26
Tinned fish	24
Bread	22
Honey	21
Vegetables	20
Tea	20
Eggs	17
Fruits	15
Margarine	14

Source: Authors' own compilation (2024)

Strikingly, the use of digital-mobile food transfer passages facilitated the transmission of perishable food commodities. The transfer of these food items is enabled by advanced digital-mobile services, which have amenities for beneficiaries of the transferred items to collect their food commodities in Zimbabwe instantaneously when the transactions in Cape Town are completed. Participants were asked about the frequency of food items being remitted to Zimbabwe. Considering the economic and COVID-19 pandemic challenges, such as retrenchments, joblessness and job losses, and loss or absence of reliable income sources (Tawodzera and Crush, 2022), most Zimbabwean migrants specified reduction in transfers and did not have pre-determined periods to transfer food commodities to households in Zimbabwe. Thus, 59% remitted food whenever possible, 14% monthly, 14% once annually, 9% twice annually, and 4% were able to transfer food remittances to Zimbabwe every three months (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Food-remitting frequency



Source: Authors' own compilation (2024)

Table 4 shows that the amount spent on food transfers correlated with the average monthly earnings of this study's participants. Participants with monthly incomes below R4,000 transmitted food items valued at R1,000 or below. A considerable majority of participants with earnings between R4,001 and R8,000 also transferred food valued less than R1,000. Participants who transmitted food items valued more than R2,000 had higher earnings exceeding R8,000. Almost half (47%) of the study's participants spent an average amount of R1,000 or below, and another 20% spent between R1,000 and R2,000. Participants with incomes around R4,000 spent a quarter of their monthly earnings to transfer food to Zimbabwe.

Table 4: Rand amount spent on food remitted monthly to Zimbabwe

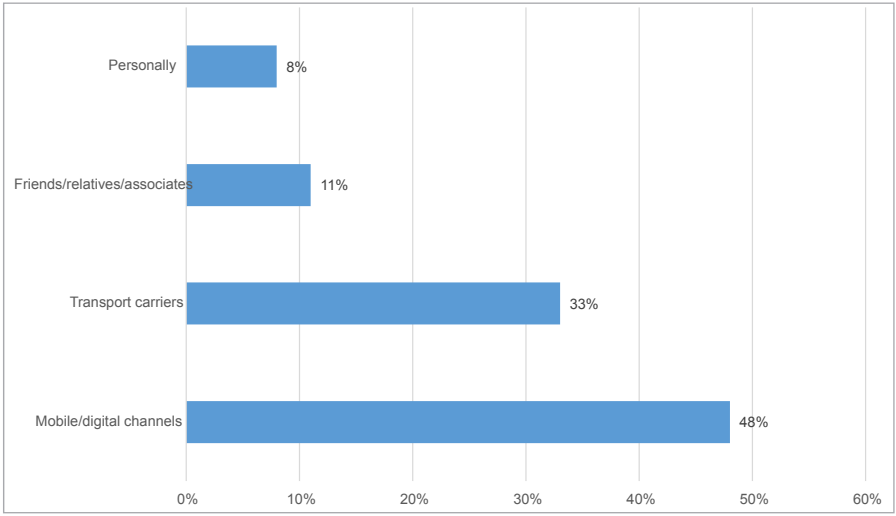
Monthly income	**Average expenditure on food remittances to Zimbabwe**					
	1,000 or below	**1,001–2,000**	**2,001–3,000**	**3,001–4,000**	**4,001 +**	**Total**
4,000 and below	10	0	0	0	0	10
4,001–8,000	29	3	1	0	0	33
8,001–15,000	8	9	5	1	0	23
15,001–20,000	0	6	3	3	2	14
20,001 and above	0	2	6	5	7	20
Total	47	20	15	9	9	100

Source: Authors' own compilation (2024)

Digital-mobile and informal channels

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an inevitable rise in the use of digital technologies because of nationwide lockdowns and social distancing protocols (Agur et al., 2020; Pandey and Pal, 2020). Along similar lines, Machasio (2020) posits that government representatives and health practitioners also advocated for the use of contactless and cashless methods of payment to lessen the risk of transmitting the virus through the handling of cash and person-to-person contact. This current study shows that 48% of the participants primarily transfer food remittances from South Africa to Zimbabwe through recently introduced digital-mobile technology-based channels (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Main food-remitting channels



Source: Authors' own compilation (2024)

The regular informal methods of transferring remittances through the South Africa–Zimbabwe remittance corridor were disrupted in early 2020 due to the pandemic lockdowns, travel bans, strict mobility restrictions, and border closures that the governments imposed. During the early lockdowns, the general mobility of people outside their residences was restricted, except for essential activities such as purchasing food and medicines. Sithole et al. (2022, 2023, 2024a) postulate that the lockdown restrictions disrupted the migrants' ability to transfer food remittances via informal passages.

Thus, with pandemic disruptions that led to a notable shift from informal channels to digital and mobile-based passages, one Zimbabwean migrant remarked: "I was using buses to send my family some groceries. But because the pandemic caused the border to close, I decided to use the Malaicha and Mukuru services on my

phone." Some participants in this study who used the new digital-mobile pathways expressed that they were accessible, rapid, secure, reasonably priced, and reliable. Hello Paisa launched the Malaicha app that adds a convenient channel to send food groceries. A Hello Paisa representative stated, "We are constantly looking at ways to improve our customers' lives, and Malaicha.com is just another way of doing that. Shopping in SA and getting your goods in Zimbabwe the very same day is a game-changer for any Zimbabwean" (Mzekandaba, 2019). Similarly, the new fintech businesses that provide cross-border grocery services emphasized the simplicity and convenience of remitting food during the pandemic through digital platforms. In an interview, a representative of one of the remittance service providers indicated the benefits of services offered by his company to Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa in the backdrop of the pandemic:

> Taking recent events into account, with the nationwide lockdown resulting in borders being closed across multiple countries in Africa, a large majority of Zimbabweans found themselves in dire straits when they could not send necessities home to their loved ones in Zimbabwe. Not to mention reduced income, hyperinflated costs, scarcity of essential goods, and widespread food shortages meant that survival necessities were more inaccessible than ever before for many in Zimbabwe. Many Zimbabweans based in South Africa looked no further than Malaicha.com for help, as it bridged the e-commerce gap between Zimbabweans and the goods [that] they needed … (Santosdiaz, 2020).

Other channels included transport carriers (malayishas, buses, and vans) (33%), friends, acquaintances or kin (11%), and personally (8%) (see Figure 4). To address the pandemic disruptions in the transfer of remittances, the participants' coping strategies included unusual pathways for transmitting cross-border food transfers. For instance, a Zimbabwean migrant stated:

> The regular forms of transportation I used could not work because the borders were closed. Because funeral companies were allowed to repatriate bodies across borders, I had to resort to using these companies to send food to Zimbabwe.

During the early stages of the pandemic, funeral firms that repatriate migrant corpses for burial in Zimbabwe were considered essential services and exempted from the pandemic-related cross-border travel prohibitions enforced by the governments of South Africa and Zimbabwe. The use of funeral businesses to remit goods to Zimbabwe was carried out clandestinely and informally to prevent detection by law enforcement officials. Similar sentiments were shared in a study by Moyo (2022), which demonstrates that during the early stages of the pandemic, any and all

accessible channels were used to transmit food, including via repatriation vans and smuggling through border sites outside formal border posts.

Notably, digital-mobile passages were primarily used by documented Zimbabwean migrants such as health professionals, office workers, teachers, and students. Documented migrants are generally not hesitant to use the formal remittance pathways, as they have access to the banking system, including credit cards and debit cards, which can be used for completing electronic transactions digitally. The South African government has significantly eased the requirements for transferring low-value remittances. Digital and mobile technology-based services for sending food transfers mainly require identification documents for low-value transmissions. However, irregular/undocumented migrants are cautious about using formal pathways due to registration and transactional requirements such as identity documents (passport, ID, and photographs) and phone numbers. Undocumented migrants fear that law enforcement officials may use their personal information to track, harass, detain, or deport them. Similarly, undertaking the transaction via the banking system requires other documents, such as proof of bank account, income source, immigration status, and proof of address. Nevertheless, other ways are accessible for making low-value transactions, such as direct payment in participating retailers and supermarkets, which undocumented migrants can use.

Migrant networks, social media, and food remitting

A recent study by Sithole (2023) highlighted the significance of migrant networking on social media in cross-border food remitting. Comparable perspectives emerge in this study. Social media apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) enabled the networking of Zimbabwean migrants, which was also crucial for sharing valuable information associated with the transfer of food remittances to Zimbabwe. Nearly 70% of the participants in this research who actively used diverse social media platforms indicated that social media groups were crucial in assisting them in making informed decisions related to the transfer of food groceries. As one of the Zimbabwean migrants stated:

> As those conversations go on, we talk about how we migrants in South Africa can send things home, and we also get to ask how other people are also sending [food items] home. So, in all of those groups, I can't think of any group where at some point, we have not had a discussion on sending things to Zimbabwe and just sharing ideas and suggestions on which way is best to use.

Another Zimbabwean migrant explained: "Social media lets us share via WhatsApp even, you know, engaging and making purchases. You can find links on social media to shops you might want to buy from. And also, you can share all of this information via WhatsApp and social media." For almost half of the participants (46%), it assisted them in selecting the ideal channels to use when transferring food

remittances to Zimbabwe. It also assisted participants in making pivotal decisions associated with the types of food to transfer (38%) and the optimal periods to remit food (16%). Social media interactions and content were also central in finding the cheapest channels (29%), accessible channels (27%), quickest channels (25%) and dependable channels (19%). Almost three-quarters (74%) of the survey participants acknowledged that interactions via text and voice on WhatsApp and other social media sites guided their decisions to use the food transfer channels primarily used by them.

Social media platforms became even more crucial for migrants in reaching such decisions during the first few months of the pandemic when informal transfer passages such as the malayishas were disrupted and challenging to access. One of the Zimbabwean migrants expressed that he used the "Zimbabweans in Cape Town" page (group on Facebook) to discover how to continue to remit food to his family/household members back home: "When we were under level five lockdown, many people were asking on social media how people who have urgent requests from Zimbabwe are sending through the things." Another Zimbabwean migrant revealed: "Somebody wrote that they were working with a funeral company that repatriates bodies of deceased Zimbabweans. And that's how they were getting their goods through." These insights concur with Unwin et al. (2022), who emphasize the value of digital technology in networking among Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. Similarly, past studies by Crush et al. (2011), Dekker and Engbersen (2014), and Borkert et al. (2018) show how social media reshapes migrant networks by facilitating information-sharing on migration, integration, and strengthening social bonds. Social media, therefore, proved invaluable to migrants in accessing essential resources, adapting to restrictions, and maintaining support networks during the pandemic.

Food-remitting challenges

The research findings revealed that the general challenges associated with transferring food remittances from South Africa to Zimbabwe included delivery delays (22%), broken/destroyed food items (11%), missing/stolen/lost items (11%), expensive transmission costs (21%), while 35% did not encounter any challenges. The particular shortcomings of the new digital-mobile technology-based channels for transferring food remittances include registration and documentation requirements, specifically when completing large transactions (there are some exemptions for low-value transfers). Irregular and undocumented migrants operating in the informal economy may not possess the required documents (e.g., immigration papers, proof of residence, proof of income sources, and bank accounts). During the in-depth interviews, Zimbabwean migrants explained the drawbacks experienced in transferring food items through digital-mobile pathways. One of the Zimbabwean migrants stated: "Sometimes the online system is down, and as a result, transactions are often incomplete." Another Zimbabwean migrant expressed another frustration:

"Sometimes I buy groceries online, but when my family wants to collect the goods, they are told that those items are out of stock and that they have got a refund or have to wait until the goods are available." Another participant specified substitution and delivery delays as prevailing problems: "Quite often the food doesn't arrive on time; occasionally there are substitutes on the order list and one at times ends up getting inferior food items – in terms of brands and nutritional content." The other challenges were high transaction charges, access-related obstacles such as power or Internet connectivity, and limited access to mobile devices and smartphones.

The use of informal passages to transmit food items from Cape Town to Zimbabwe has several drawbacks. Transferring goods (including groceries) from Cape Town to Zimbabwe through informal pathways such as malayishas is relatively high-priced because of the long distances involved. The distance between Cape Town and Beitbridge (Zimbabwean border post) is around 2,000 km and roughly 2,600 km to Harare, Zimbabwe's capital and largest city. A notable challenge in the study was the confiscation of goods by border officers for not complying with import protocols. Thus, transferring food remittances by road can be risky because of the existing likelihood of such goods being impounded by the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) officers at the Beitbridge border. This is notably the case when the quantities authorized for duty-free personal use are exceeded or a range of importation regulations are breached (Tevera, 2020). Transferring food remittances through cross-border transport carriers such as malaichas/malayishas or associates can be risky because it is centered on trust. In the instance of mishaps (e.g., theft or seizure of goods at the border by ZIMRA officials), the sender is not compensated. A participant said, "… because there is no warranty on the food items, there are no refunds if the food is lost on the way."

The findings of this study concur with previous studies by Tevera and Chikanda (2009a, 2009b) and Nzima (2017) that highlight how informal passages to transfer cash or goods to Zimbabwe generally include hindrances such as delivery delays, undependability of transfer carriers, and thefts. These prevailing obstacles are why some Zimbabwean migrants in Cape Town have opted to switch to digital and mobile food transmissions, regardless of the relatively pricey costs involved. The findings also corroborate recent studies by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2020) and Chari et al. (2022) that demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic, border disruptions and mobility restrictions caused delays in supply chains and blockages that could have negative effects on imports and the food security of impoverished households. However, despite these drawbacks, some migrants articulated that they use mainly informal transfer channels when transferring food to Zimbabwe because of being undocumented and lacking access to the banking system.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND REFLECTION ON POLICIES

In the past decade, Crush and Caesar (2016, 2018, 2020) have noted that remittance research has focused primarily on cash transfers, while in-kind remittances, such as food transfers, remain overlooked and understudied. Additionally, the growing synergies between cross-border food remittances and digital-mobile technologies in Southern Africa have seen limited examination (Sithole et al., 2022, 2023, 2024a). Despite this gap, food remittances are vital to the food and nutrition security of households in the Global South. This study highlights that cross-border food remittances are critical for migrant-sending households in economic crisis-ridden countries such as Zimbabwe, where a protracted economic crisis has aggravated food and nutrition insecurity. In precarious contexts, food remittances are vital as a safety net, assisting households to survive episodes of economic shocks, limited food access, food shortages, hyperinflation, high prices, climate change-induced droughts, and reduced agricultural outputs.

Beyond supplementing cash remittances, food transfers provide essential nourishment for consumption and assist in lessening food insecurity among impoverished households. Therefore, food remittances are crucial for enhancing the SDGs related to eradicating hunger, food insecurity, poverty, and inequalities and improving health and well-being. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, in-kind transfers, such as food remittances and groceries, were predominantly remitted through informal channels, including transport carriers such as vans, trucks, and buses. At the same time, some fintech companies had begun to develop services to facilitate the transfer of goods, including food, through these digital-mobile technology-based pathways. However, pandemic-related disruptions, such as travel bans, mobility restrictions, border closures, and restrictions in economic activities, accelerated the adoption of digital-mobile technology-based channels by migrants for cross-border remittances, marking a shift toward technologically advanced methods of transferring essential goods.

Contactless channels like digital and mobile platforms offered greater accessibility and convenience during the pandemic, as in-person transactions posed health risks and were deemed unsafe due to the potential for virus transmission. Supporting these findings, Agur et al. (2020) assert that digital and mobile transaction methods are essential for processing remittances during crises. Additionally, social media emerged as a critical tool for communication and information-sharing and facilitating remittance transfers during the pandemic. Sithole (2023) notes that platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) facilitate virtual communication, strategies and decision-making, enabling the transfer of food remittances even under lockdowns. Social networking apps like WhatsApp show how digital-mobile apps can be used directly to complete remittance transactions and offer affordable, accessible, and convenient services to maintain remittance flows.

Pandemic disruptions resulted in restrictions on transferring food remittances through informal remittance channels. However, migrants exhibited resilience by

using alternative informal pathways. For example, smuggling through border spots outside official posts and using transport operators and repatriation vehicles that were permitted to operate as essential services. In the post-COVID-19 landscape, it is expected that many migrants will revert to these informal, cost-effective channels, although the use of digital-mobile platforms is anticipated to grow gradually. Thus, a hybrid model incorporating informal and digital channels will likely emerge. Digital-mobile technology-based remittance channels offer benefits such as services that are speedy, convenient, affordable, secure, and easy to use, but they also have limitations.

Related studies by Sithole et al. (2022, 2023, 2024a) highlight bureaucratic regulations and processes, high transaction fees, electronic transaction errors, and connectivity issues as a result of power outages or limited Internet access, lack of access to cell phones or smart devices to complete the transactions, poor infrastructure, and slow adoption of artificial intelligence (AI). Other challenges include cyber security, data privacy issues, and misinformation, especially on social media. Furthermore, there are accessibility disparities (digital divide) (Rodima-Taylor, 2021), including some communities or individuals experiencing impediments such as low digital literacy, limited education, income constraints, and gender-based restrictions on technology access. The above obstacles can hinder the agenda to promote accessibility and inclusiveness aspects of marginalized communities' digital-mobile remittance service options.

Regarding policy reflections, fintech and digital-mobile technology-based remittance companies have significantly contributed to the financial inclusion of unbanked persons, undocumented migrants, informal traders, low-income persons, and rural communities in the Global South, including Southern Africa. In South Africa, policy settings around remittance transfers are relatively relaxed, but some restrictions continue to hinder progress in inclusivity, especially for irregular migrants. For example, undocumented migrants are allowed to remit only low-value transfers. To support inclusivity in financial and digital access (especially for marginalized groups such as impoverished persons and undocumented migrants), policymakers should consider revising the remittance policy framework to raise the maximum permissible transfer amount for irregular migrants, enabling them to remit adequate food and groceries to their families. Also, infrastructure development is essential to maximize the potential of digital and mobile remittance channels and to support the adoption of AI solutions, such as automated, real-time customer support chatbots available 24/7 (Sithole et al., 2024a, 2024b). Advanced digital and mobile technology amenities have the vast potential to boost efficiency and enhance customer service and user experience, making digital-mobile remittance options more accessible and resourceful.

The COVID-19 lockdowns and pandemic-induced restrictions, such as mobility limitations, travel bans, curfews, visa suspensions, and border closures, disrupted remittance flows and generally disproportionately impacted foreign nationals (who lacked government support and struggled to take care of themselves

or to transfer remittances regularly). Balancing public health policies, responses, and economic activities is crucial to mitigate such effects in future pandemics and crises. There is also a need to include foreign nationals and the undocumented in government support and ensure that public health measures do not overly hinder all economic activities, mobility, and remittance flows (including food transfers critical to food and nutrition security for migrant-sending households). Although digital-mobile technology-based remittance services are generally reasonably priced, regulatory adjustments are needed to lower transaction fees further. Reducing these costs would promote the adoption of digital-mobile remittance channels and make them more accessible to low-income migrants who regularly sacrifice their limited resources to support dependents and family members back home.

Sithole et al. (2024a) recommend promoting and expanding digital-mobile technology-based remittance services by highlighting the significance of supporting partnerships between digital-mobile technology-based remittance services and local retailers in Zimbabwe to ensure the timely flow of food and groceries from senders to beneficiaries. Therefore, expanding partnerships (including between remittance systems and local businesses) can enhance the reach of digital-mobile technology-based remittance systems and service delivery, particularly in remote and rural areas where access to digital-mobile devices or technologies and food markets may be limited. Additionally, to reinforce food system resilience, governments must support digital-mobile technologies. This includes developing digital-mobile infrastructure, promoting digital innovations, incorporating food distribution and retailing, enhancing agricultural supply chains, and improving market access for small businesses, smallholder farmers, and consumers. There is a need for the integration of digital-mobile tools into comprehensive food security strategies and for government support of vulnerable populations to stay linked to crucial resources during future crises, pandemics, economic shocks, or climate-related disruptions (Sithole et al., 2024a, 2024b).

CONCLUSION

In sub-Saharan Africa, cross-border food remittances are critical to dietary diversity and food and nutrition security. However, they remain significantly under-researched compared to cash remittances in discussions on digital-mobile remittance transfers and broader remittance debates. This paper addresses this gap by examining the intersection of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the digitalization of cross-border food transfers in the South Africa–Zimbabwe remittance corridor. A striking result uncovers that cross-border food remittances are crucial for tackling food insecurity and hunger in Zimbabwe, a country experiencing prolonged economic predicaments, including high unemployment, poverty, diminishing agricultural yields, inadequate access to food, high food prices, and food shortages. The digital-mobile technology-based channels and other channels to transfer cross-border remittance align with

the SDGs by contributing to regular food flows, food security, hunger eradication, reduced poverty and inequalities, and improved health and well-being.

The pandemic and public health measures to mitigate and contain the spread of the coronavirus, including lockdowns, mobility restrictions, travel bans, and border closures, disrupted conventional informal remittance channels, inducing a notable shift toward digital and mobile technology-based strategies. Digital-mobile technology-based channels were resourceful during the pandemic. They enabled virtual, contactless transactions via smartphones and mobile devices in cross-border food remitting, eliminating the need for physical (in-person) interaction. The benefits of digital-mobile technology for remittances are massive. They offer services and channels that enhance a convenient and regular flow of food remittances and are speedy, accessible, reliable, convenient, secure, and affordable. They promote financial inclusion for vulnerable groups, including undocumented migrants, the unbanked, informal traders, low-income earners, and residents of rural or remote areas. Digital solutions are poised to grow and provide service alongside popular informal channels in the post-pandemic era.

There is potential for these digital solutions to integrate into hybrid systems that combine conventional methods, such as transport carriers (malayishas), with digital-mobile pathways, creating a more robust and resilient remittance ecosystem. Additionally, social media has played a crucial role in facilitating interactions and information exchange among migrants, their networks, transport carriers, and service providers for digital-mobile technology-based remittance services. This role of social media has not only aided access to suitable, reliable, and accessible food transfer pathways but also fostered a sense of connection among the stakeholders. Policymakers are urged to explore options to increase maximum transfer limits (especially for undocumented migrants), reduce transaction costs, and balance public health issues with economic activities during pandemics and crises. In conclusion, there is a pressing need for increased policy and research focus on the nature, impact, and digital-mobile technology transformation of cross-border food remittances, particularly regarding their fusion with informal channels, migrants' economic activities, emerging technologies, and AI to enhance resilient food systems and food and nutrition security.

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"An Endless Cycle of Worry and Hardship": The Impact of COVID-19 on the Food Security of Somali Migrants and Refugees in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

COVID-19 has produced unprecedented effects on the global economy and society by exposing multiple weaknesses and faultlines. The pandemic has disrupted global and local agricultural production processes and food supply chains with negative consequences for food security. Containment measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, including strict restrictions on the movement of people, goods, and services have affected urban food systems adversely in multiple ways. Urban migrants and refugees in many parts of the Global South have been disproportionately hit by these measures, increasing the precarity of their living conditions and exacerbating the food insecurity of the migrants' households. Based on the results of a household survey and in-depth interviews with Somali migrants in Nairobi, Kenya in August 2022, this study documents the pandemic-related experience of these migrants in food access and consumption and assesses the overall impacts of COVID-19 on their food security. This study seeks to contribute to the emerging body of case study evidence that assesses the food security outcomes of the pandemic in vulnerable populations.

Keywords: COVID-19, food security, urban refugees, migration

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INTRODUCTION

Cities have been labeled "Ground Zero" of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Secretary-General of the United Nations (Guterres, 2023). Urban areas, especially large cities, were hotspots of the coronavirus spread and impact because of their high population concentration, overcrowding, and poor health and living conditions (Florida et al., 2021). In major African cities such as Nairobi, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated preexisting challenges for urban migrants and refugees, especially those with limited mobility due to their lack of legal documents (Luiu et al., 2022). Migrant and refugee vulnerability was compounded by existing inequities, exclusionary government responses, and residential segregation (Hitch et al., 2022). The situation was particularly dire in informal settlements and low-income neighborhoods, where overcrowding and lack of basic services made adherence to containment measures difficult (Kibe et al., 2020).

The Kenyan government imposed a nationwide dusk-to-dawn curfew in March 2020 restricting movement between and within urban areas (Wangari et al., 2021). These control measures led to economic slowdown, unemployment, loss of income, and reduced mobility, further worsening pre-pandemic poverty and socio-economic vulnerability (Luiu et al., 2022; Kunyanga et al., 2023). Somali migrants and refugees in Nairobi were particularly affected by government pandemic control measures. Most Somalis live in the Eastleigh section of Nairobi, known locally as "Little Mogadishu" (Carrier, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2024). Eastleigh was officially designated by the government as one of two major COVID-19 hotspots within the country and experienced a harsher response than other parts of Nairobi (Lusambili et al., 2020). In May 2020, after a surge in cases in Nairobi concentrated in Eastleigh, the Kenyan government imposed a lockdown that involved a cessation of mobility into and out of the area for one month (Hiiraan Online, 2020; Lusambili et al., 2021). Markets and food stores, including restaurants and eateries were also shut down during this period.

By documenting the pandemic-related food security experiences of Somali migrants in Nairobi during the pandemic, this paper aims to contribute to the emerging body of case study evidence assessing the negative outcomes of the pandemic on vulnerable populations in African cities (Kassa and Grace, 2020; Durizzo et al., 2021; Chirisa et al., 2022; Nuwematsiko et al., 2022; Turok and Visagie, 2022; Bhanye et al., 2023; Dupas et al., 2023; Onyango et al., 2023). Assembling data from a household survey and in-depth interviews with Somali migrants in Eastleigh, the paper assesses the overall impact of COVID-19 on their food security. It particularly focuses on the challenges faced by Somali migrants in accessing and consuming sufficient and nutritious food during the pandemic. Thus, the paper adds a crucial layer to our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations in cities of the Global South.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted food security worldwide, with pronounced consequences in the Global South where economic vulnerabilities and structural inequalities predated the crisis. Pandemic-response containment measures – including lockdowns, curfews, and trade restrictions – led to severe disruptions of agricultural production and supply chains, undermining food access and affordability across low- and middle-income countries (Laborde et al., 2020; Béné et al., 2021; Balistreri et al., 2022). In urban areas, food systems were particularly affected, as restrictions limited the movement of goods and people, stalling both formal and informal food supply networks. Low-income households and vulnerable groups, such as migrants and refugees, were disproportionately affected by these disruptions because of their dependence on informal food markets and lack of access to food reserves or alternative income sources (Béné et al., 2021; Swinnen and Vos, 2021; Bitzer et al., 2024).

In urban areas of the Global South, where daily sustenance depends on accessible and resilient food systems, the socio-economic effects of the pandemic exacerbated preexisting inequalities. Numerous studies have documented how food insecurity surged in cities where containment measures and lockdowns restricted informal trade, a critical source of food and income for low-income urban populations (Crush and Si, 2020; Resnick, 2020; Rwafa-Ponela et al., 2022; Crush and Tawodzera, 2024). These disruptions highlighted the fragility of urban food systems in these contexts, as well as the limited capacity of local governments to provide adequate food support to marginalized communities. Urban refugees in African cities encountered compounding food security challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, as mobility restrictions, lockdowns, economic shutdowns, and exclusion from social services intensified their vulnerability (Bukuluki et al., 2020; Odunitan-Wayas et al., 2020; Moyo et al., 2021; Nyamnjoh et al., 2022; Tenerowicz and Wellman, 2024). In most cities, migrant-dense localities experienced heightened food insecurity due to the strict lockdowns that limited both physical and economic access to food sources (Resnick, 2020; Mulu and Mbanza, 2021; Luiu et al., 2022). Additionally, lack of legal documentation barred many migrants from accessing government food aid, deepening their dependence on informal networks for survival (Ahmed et al., 2023).

Social and economic inequities have long shaped food access among migrant populations in African cities, and the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these inequalities. Urban migrants and refugees often reside in densely populated informal settlements with limited infrastructure, where access to essential services like water, sanitation, and healthcare is minimal (Kibe et al., 2020). The pandemic worsened these conditions, as lockdowns restricted mobility, limiting migrants' ability to access food and social services. While many African governments implemented food assistance programs, migrants – especially those lacking legal documentation – were largely excluded from these initiatives (Hitch et al., 2022). In cities like Harare, Kampala, Lilongwe, and Nairobi, official pandemic responses exposed and often

deepened existing inequalities, prompting grassroots strategies within communities to mitigate food and resource shortages (Sverdlik et al., 2024).

The pandemic triggered a surge in food prices across African cities, further constraining food access for financially insecure urban migrant populations. Previous studies indicate that food prices rose sharply due to supply chain disruptions and lockdown measures, with maize prices increasing by 26% to 44% in various regions (Adewopo et al., 2021; Agyei et al., 2021). In Nairobi, food prices rose by an average of 13.8%, exacerbating food insecurity among low-income households (Kunyanga et al., 2023). In addition, food price inflation affected both formal and informal markets, with staple foods subject to significant price hikes (FAO et al., 2020). This spike in prices meant that even when food was available, affordability became a significant barrier for migrants in urban African settings.

In Nairobi, the growing literature on COVID-19 has focused on the vulnerability of households to pandemic shocks (Onyango et al., 2021), the impact of travel restrictions on mobility patterns (Pinchoff et al., 2021b; Kasuku et al., 2022), the income hit for small informal food enterprises (Chege et al., 2021; Moochi and Mutswenje, 2022; Mwangi and Mwaura 2023), food supply chain disruptions (Alonso et al., 2023; Kunyanga et al., 2023), and economic hardships in the city's informal settlements (Nyadera and Onditi, 2020; Quaife et al., 2020; Pinchoff et al., 2021a; Joshi et al., 2022; Solymári et al., 2022). Some attention has also been paid to the impact of the pandemic on food security in the informal settlements and other low-income areas of the city (Mbijiwe et al., 2021; Merchant et al., 2022).

One survey of over 2,000 Nairobi households found that 90% of households were in a dire food insecurity situation, including being unable to eat preferred kinds of food, eating a limited variety of foods, consuming smaller portions than they felt they needed, and eating fewer meals in a day (Chege et al., 2022). Onyango et al. (2024) note that only 38% of informal settlement households had consistently acceptable diets, while another two-thirds (61%) fluctuated between acceptable and unacceptable diets. Shupler et al. (2021) report that there was an almost universal (95%) income decline in an informal settlement during the lockdown, leading to 88% of households reporting food insecurity. Household response strategies included changing consumption activities, reorganizing household finances, reducing urban household size, prioritizing children's access to food, depending on social networks, and relying on household food production.

The small cluster of studies on the pandemic experiences of migrants and refugees in Nairobi have focused on disruption to their transnational networks and the strengthening of local social relations of mutuality and support (Müller, 2022, 2023; Shizha, 2023). Other studies suggest that the pandemic widened gaps in social services and healthcare and depressed social support within Nairobi's refugee community (Tenerowicz and Wellman, 2024). To date, the impact of the pandemic on migrant and refugee food security is a notable gap in the literature. Previous research has indicated that the economic effects of the lockdown were felt acutely

by Somali migrants in Nairobi, many of whom also work as informal vendors (Doll and Golole, 2023). With lockdown measures in place, both food availability and income sources diminished, leaving the community in a precarious state (Lusambili et al., 2021). However, this is the first study we know of to systematically examine the impact of the pandemic on the food security of urban migrants and refugees from Somalia living in Eastleigh, Nairobi.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Nairobi's Eastleigh section, with its predominantly Somali population and cultural identity. Eastleigh itself is a densely populated area that serves as a residential, commercial, and social hub for Somali migrants and refugees, making it a critical site for examining the food security challenges faced by this population. The study employed a mixed-methods approach to capture the complexity of food security dynamics among Somali households during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team selected households through random sampling to ensure a fair representation of migrant households in Eastleigh. Random sampling ensured that a variety of household structures, economic status, and food security experiences were captured. As the area houses migrants from Somalia and Somali Kenyans, the research team employed a screening question to identify households with a Somalia-born head. The search yielded 268 households from an overall sample of 318. This paper therefore reports on the findings from the survey of these 268 households.

First, the research team administered a structured quantitative household survey to the sampled households, collecting data on demographics, food security levels, economic conditions, and pandemic-related experiences. The team analyzed quantitative data using descriptive statistical methods to summarize household characteristics, food security levels, and the economic impacts of the pandemic. Researchers assessed food security using a combination of indicators, including the Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS), the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), and the Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence (HFIAP) indicator. The HDDS captures dietary diversity as a proxy for the nutritional value of the diet, while the HFIAS and HFIAP assess the prevalence and severity of food insecurity (Swindale and Bilinsky, 2006; Coates et al., 2007).

Second, the research team conducted 30 qualitative in-depth interviews with Somali migrant household heads to capture detailed personal narratives of food access challenges, coping strategies, and broader socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. These interviews were conducted in Somali, Swahili, or English by trained local research assistants with contextual and linguistic expertise. Finally, the team conducted 15 key informant interviews with community leaders, business representatives, and organizers to provide broader insights into the economic and social dynamics influencing food security in Eastleigh. The researchers analyzed the qualitative data from the in-depth and key informant interviews thematically

to identify recurring patterns and narratives related to food insecurity, economic disruptions, and coping strategies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 provides a profile of the respondents and households surveyed. Of the respondents, 59% were male and 41% female, with just over half married and a quarter single. Somali households in Eastleigh live predominantly in flats or apartments, reflecting the dense urban environment of the area. Nuclear (39%) and male-centered (29%) households predominated, with only 10% being female-centered (defined as a household with a female head without a spouse or partner in the household).

Table 1: Somali household profile

Sex of Household Respondents	**No.**	**%**
Male	157	58.6
Female	111	41.4
Marital Status of Household Respondents		
Married	144	53.7
Single	63	23.5
Divorced	41	15.3
Widowed	11	4.1
Separated	8	3,0
Abandoned	1	0.4
Housing Type		
Flat/apartment	246	91.8
House (bungalow)	19	7.1
Semi-permanent informal dwelling	2	0.7
House (maisonette)	1	0.4
Household Structure		
Nuclear	104	38.8
Male-centred	78	29.1
Female-centred	27	10.1
Extended	59	22.0

Source: Authors' own work

Three-quarters of the survey respondents said their households were economically worse off than before the pandemic. Only 22% said their conditions had improved. The reasons for this pandemic shock are evident from Table 2. Almost half of the

households had household members losing their jobs and unable to find work (see Table 3). As many as 80% of the participants reported that their households experienced a loss of income. The high level of job loss is reflected in the closure of businesses and the halt in economic activities because of the lockdown and other restrictions. However, this was not the only reason for reduced income, as many households in Eastleigh derive income from running an informal business, and the shutdown of these enterprises affected their sales and income directly.

Table 2: Perception of changes in household economic conditions

	%
Much worse	46.6
Worse	28.1
Much better	13.8
Better	7.8
Remained the same	3.7

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3: Household impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Members of the household became unemployed & could not find a job	27.0	21.7	33.7	1.1	14.6
Members of the household experienced income losses	27.6	52.3	1.1	14.9	4.1
Members of the household had increased food expenses	65.0	2.0	1.9	28.8	0.4
Members of the household found it difficult to access food from informal food vendors	54.4	30.8	9.0	1.1	4.1
Members of the household had less food to eat	30.7	18.0	38.2	9.0	4.1

Source: Authors' own work

Two-thirds of the Somali households experienced an increase in food expenses during the pandemic (see Table 3). The increase can be attributed to disrupted food supply chains, which particularly affected communities relying on informal food sources. Informal food networks play a central role in the urban food security of migrant communities such as this, and disruptions can severely limit access to necessary food supplies. The difficulty in accessing food from informal vendors was pronounced, with 85% of households funding it harder to obtain food this way during the pandemic.

The survey findings provide a lens through which to interpret the subjective experiences relayed by respondents during the in-depth interviews. For example, one Somali refugee lost his job as a shopkeeper and was forced to lay low during the pandemic for fear of being assaulted or arrested:

> COVID-19 really affected our household, especially in 2020 and 2021. I lost my job working as a shopkeeper in Eastleigh, Nairobi, due to COVID-19. I could not also move freely to look for a job due to COVID-19 containment measures. Police used to arrest and beat people who are found walking outside. For someone like me with refugee documents, I could not move freely, as I could easily get arrested. Therefore, I had to stay at home for most of the pandemic period. In addition, the living condition is now harder than before the pandemic. Everything is expensive, and the price of foodstuffs has gone up. The tough economic conditions have had negative effects on my household's food security situation (Interview No. 16).

In this case, the suffering was clearly compounded by his being unable to look for other employment and by the increase in the cost of food. Another respondent faced a similar situation when the shop in which they worked shut down and they lost their job. Efforts to find another job proved fruitless:

> Before COVID-19, I worked in a wholesale food shop to support my wife and our four kids. I was the sole breadwinner of my family, and my income was essential for us to survive. When the pandemic hit, the shop was closed due to lockdown measures, and I lost my job. With no income, we really struggled to put food on the table. Every day was a battle to find enough to eat and make ends meet. The situation was dire, and I often felt helpless. Our savings quickly ran out, and there was no work to be found. The impact on our lives was devastating, and it felt like we were trapped in an endless cycle of worry and hardship (Interview No. 19).

This recollection of the negative impact of the pandemic is indicative of a significant deterioration in food security and general well-being among the Somali migrants. The closure of informal markets not only restricted food access, but also further

marginalized already vulnerable populations, amplifying the food security crisis among urban migrants. One respondent recalled how the closure of shops made food access a challenge:

> We rely heavily on informal food vendors for our daily sustenance, buying cheap groceries and fresh produce to feed our families. However, during the pandemic, Eastleigh was considered a hotspot, and the government closed all food-vending shops. This made it incredibly difficult for us to access food. The closure of these vendors, who are our primary source for affordable and fresh food, left us struggling. We couldn't buy the groceries and produce we needed, and the alternatives were either too expensive or inaccessible. It was a challenging time for all of us, and at times [we] went hungry because we simply couldn't afford the higher prices in the formal supermarkets (Interview No. 23).

As Table 3 shows, nearly half of the surveyed households reported having less food to eat during the pandemic. The restrictions on informal vending also had negative implications for households that relied on income from street vending:

> Before the pandemic, I worked as an informal food vendor, selling meat and groceries in Eastleigh's Jam Street. This job was our main source of income and helped me support my family. When COVID-19 hit, everything changed. The market was shut down, and movement was heavily restricted. I couldn't sell produce anymore, and our income disappeared overnight. To make things worse, the cost of food went up significantly. As a vendor, I saw firsthand how the disrupted supply chains and increased market prices affected everyone. People who used to buy from me struggled to afford basic groceries. My family was no different; we had to pay more for the food we needed, but we had no income to cover these expenses. It was a constant struggle to make ends meet, and every day felt like a battle for survival (Interview No. 30).

Food price inflation in Kenya exacerbated the challenges faced by Somali migrants, who typically have limited financial reserves and rely heavily on the informal sector for their food (Ahmed et al., 2023). However, loss of income and food inflation were far from being the only livelihood challenges. In addition to food insecurity, many faced challenges paying for services such as water and electricity:

> In Eastleigh, we usually live in a densely populated neighborhood that is both commercial and residential. We purchase everything, including food, water, and electricity. During COVID-19, there was a heavy crackdown with strict restrictions on movement in and out of the neighborhood. This made life extremely difficult for us, as we were deprived of most essentials.

> We frequently went without sufficient food, and getting clean water became a struggle. The prices of everything went up, and there were times when we had no electricity because we couldn't afford to pay for it. The restrictions isolated us from our usual sources of support and supply, leaving many families in a state of constant need and anxiety (Interview No. 25).

In many cases, households experienced multiple deprivations, as evidenced by the testimony of this respondent. To understand the broader impact of the pandemic restrictions, the research team used the Lived Poverty Index (LPI), which provides data on the frequency with which households were deprived of a range of necessities. Table 4 shows that significant sections of the Somali migrant community faced critical shortages. For example, 44% of households reported always or frequently going without sufficient food and almost half struggled with inconsistent access to clean water and medical treatment. Access to electricity and cooking fuel was also significantly disrupted, and most households faced these challenges during the pandemic period.

Table 4. Household deprivation frequency during COVID-19 pandemic

During the pandemic period:	Always (%)	Many times (%)	Several times (%)	Just once or twice (%)	Never (%)
How often did this household go without cooking fuel (kerosene or gas) in your home.	20.0	47.4	6.4	11.2	15.0
How often did this household go without enough food to eat?	15.0	29.2	6.4	1.1	40.8
How often did this household go without electricity in your home?	13.6	44.2	23.6	8.6	10.0
How often did this household go without cash income	2.0	33.5	12.0	29.7	24.1
How often did this household go without medicine or medical treatment?	0.8	48.9	10.2	26.3	13.9
How often did this household go without clean water for home use?	0.4	48.3	21.1	14.0	16.2

Source: Authors' own work

Table 5: Levels of food insecurity and dietary diversity

	%
Food secure	42.5
Mildly food insecure	7.9
Moderately food insecure	11.2
Severely food insecure	38.4
Mean HDDS	7.4

Source: Authors' own work

Table 5 illustrates the stark reality of food insecurity among Somali migrant households in Nairobi. Almost 60% of the households experienced some level of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, with severe food insecurity affecting 38% of households. This finding underscores the compounded effects of economic disruptions, inflation in food prices, and the collapse of informal food networks during the pandemic. The high prevalence of severe food insecurity not only highlights the precarious living conditions of Somali migrants but also points to systemic inequities in urban food systems that disproportionately impact marginalized groups during crises.

CONCLUSION

The findings reported in this paper illuminate the significant and multi-dimensional challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic for Somali migrants in Nairobi. The research uncovered a complex tapestry of economic, health, and social challenges intricately woven into the lives of these individuals, reflecting a microcosm of the broader systemic issues faced by vulnerable urban communities across the Global South. Moreover, the individual narratives of hardship recounted in the in-depth interviews, emphasize the human dimension of the pandemic's toll and reflect the urgency for compassionate and comprehensive policy measures.

As researchers continue to navigate the pandemic's impacts and aftermath, the experiences detailed by Somali migrants in this paper serve as a poignant illustration of the extensive challenges that lie ahead for similar communities. They underscore the need for policies that address not only immediate food distribution and health concerns but also the underlying structural inequities, exacerbated by the pandemic. The evidence presented in this paper highlights the acute need for targeted interventions designed to bolster food security and foster economic resilience within urban refugee populations. These interventions must address the multi-layered impact of the pandemic, acknowledging the vulnerability of migrants to the shutdown of informal economies and the subsequent tightening of food environments. Future research is imperative and should aim to build on these findings, enhancing our strategies to ensure the well-being of migrants. Such work should not only offer

relief during global crises but also pave the way for long-term resilience and stability, providing a roadmap for the recovery of migrant communities in the Global South.

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Pandemic Mobilities, Livelihood Disruptions, and Food Insecurities among Eastern Cape Migrants in Cape Town and Johannesburg during COVID-19

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on internal migrants from the Eastern Cape in the cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa, with a focus on mobility restrictions, livelihood disruptions, and food insecurity. Methodologically, the paper draws on a survey of 1,733 migrant households in the two cities conducted in 2023 and identifies significant economic hardships and increased food insecurity among internal migrants during the pandemic. Findings reveal that the pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities, with many migrants experiencing job losses, reduced remittances, and heightened food insecurity. The paper underscores the need to differentiate between internal and international migrants in policy responses in times of crisis to ensure targeted support for the most affected populations.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, internal migration, food insecurity, South Africa, migrant households

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a crisis of (im)mobility, since public health restrictions on personal movement disrupted long-standing patterns and periodicities of migration (Rajan et al., 2020; Martin and Bergmann, 2021). At the country level, the (im)mobility crisis has been most extensively documented in India, where there was a mass exodus of internal migrants from the cities during the early weeks of COVID-19 to escape pandemic lockdowns. Studies of this reverse human tide have focused on the desperation and misery of around 10 million migrants who headed for their rural homes (Rajan et al., 2020; Jesline et al., 2021; Carswell et al., 2022; Rajan and Bhagat, 2022). However, many more migrants were stranded in the cities where they struggled to survive as their income streams dried up (Rahaman et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022). As Sengupta and Jha (2020: 152) note, "migrant informal workers were mired in a survival crisis, through income loss, hunger, destitution and persecution from authorities policing containment."

In South Africa, there have been several studies on the implications of pandemic restrictions for international migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (Mukumbang et al., 2020; Odunitan-Wayas et al., 2021; Angu et al., 2022; Ramachandran et al., 2024). Unlike in India, less attention has been focused on the impact of the pandemic on internal migrants. The South African government's own 700-page self-evaluation of its COVID-19 policy response applies the term "migrant" to non-South Africans only (Presidency of South Africa, 2021). Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2020c) also defines a migrant as "someone who is born outside South Africa, while anyone born in South Africa is classified as a 'non-migrant.'" Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives and livelihoods of internal migrants have received only limited attention (Ginsburg et al., 2022). Internal migrants also remain largely invisible in the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations in the country. Some studies have shown that pandemic vulnerability and impacts differed between urban and rural areas, but they do not address the consequences for rural–urban migrants themselves directly (Visagie and Turok, 2021; Shifa et al., 2022). Recent surveys of the negative economic impacts of COVID-19 in South Africa also do not identify the specific experiences and challenges of internal migrants during successive waves of the pandemic (Espi et al., 2021; Ranchhod and Daniels, 2021; Köhler et al., 2023). Therefore, there remains a significant knowledge gap surrounding the impacts of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of the large internal migrant population of the country.

Where Indian and South African pandemic studies are similar is that neither pays attention to the impact of the pandemic on the food security of internal migrants. In India, there have been several assessments of the impact of the pandemic on household food security in general (Mishra and Rampal, 2020; Ravula et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2022). However, the food security experience of returning and immobilized migrants is limited to a small number of case studies (Jolad and Shah, 2022; Luthra et al., 2024). Similarly, in South Africa, there is a growing literature

on the general implications of the pandemic for household food security (Arndt et al., 2020; Van der Berg et al., 2021; Hart et al., 2022; Ngavara, 2022). However, few studies explicitly examine the relationship between internal migration, livelihood disruption, and food insecurity during the pandemic. There is thus a significant knowledge gap surrounding the impacts of COVID-19 on the large internal migrant population of the country.

This paper examines the effects of the pandemic on interprovincial migrants from the Eastern Cape who resided in Cape Town and Johannesburg in 2020 and 2021. It addresses three questions: first, did migrants respond to pandemic restrictions on mobility by returning to the Eastern Cape, and, if so, what reasons did they give for return and how long did they remain there? Second, what was the extent of the disruption of livelihoods caused by the government's response to COVID-19? Third, what impact did the pandemic have on the food security of urban-based migrant households? In this paper we examine how the literature treats each of these questions and then focus on the implications of findings from our household survey of migrants in the two cities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section focuses on the impact of the national pandemic lockdown on internal mobility in South Africa. In late March 2020, the South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, declared a national state of disaster under the Disaster Management Act of 2002, which remained in effect for the next two years (Fourie and Lamb, 2023). On 26 March, a sweeping national lockdown and stay-at-home order came into effect and remained in force for over a month. Subsequently, it gradually relaxed, although many of the prohibitions on individual and group activity remained or were reimposed during successive waves of the pandemic from late 2020 to 2021. In addition to the stay-at-home order, there was a complete mobility ban on all non-essential international, cross-border, and interprovincial travel during the initial lockdown. More than 24,000 members of the South African Police Services were mobilized to enforce the lockdown, supplemented by municipal police and the army. Roadblocks were set up on all major routes into and out of both cities, and within the cities on the main roads.

The effectiveness of the enforcement of the nation-wide lockdown and mobility restrictions is illustrated by cellphone mobility big data. Carlitz and Makhura (2021) draw on Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports and Mobility Trends Reports published by Apple Maps to chart the impact of the lockdown on population mobility, which they regard as a proxy for compliance. They show that there was a dramatic decline in inter-provincial and intra-city mobility in the first three months of the pandemic in response to the government's lockdown orders. The Western Cape registered the greatest decline in mobility to work (down by 71%), to retail and recreation (by 78%), to transit stations (by 84%) and to grocery/pharmacy outlets (by 50%).

Stats SA conducted two online surveys between April and July in 2020 that suggest that there was limited mobility during the pandemic lockdown (Stats SA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). In April, only 3% of respondents had changed their province of residence and 3% had moved within the province. More than 90% had not moved at all. By July, the proportion who had changed their provincial place of residence had increased from 3% to 6%. Furthermore, 13% had engaged in interprovincial travel since the start of the lockdown, of whom 26% had traveled to attend funerals and 15% to provide essential services, both deemed legitimate reasons for travel. This data therefore suggests that most respondents did not move out of or within their province during the first half of 2020.

In contrast, Posel and Casale (2021) argue that widespread internal population movement was to be expected for three main reasons. First, they suggest that 3.3 million households had members who were migrants working in other parts of the country and that workplace closures and layoffs meant that they would return home for livelihood support (as millions did in India). Second, because kin networks play an important role in providing support to family members during times of crisis and insecurity, migrants who lost their jobs would be forced to move to stay with family or friends. Third, the closure of all educational institutions would force many students to return to their parents' homes. The authors analyze NIDS-CRAM survey data from the University of Cape Town and conclude that there was substantial movement during the first phases of South Africa's lockdown (Posel and Casale, 2021). The proportion of respondents who moved to a different household in March 2020 was 8% while 16% moved in March and/or May 2020. Of these moves, half were interprovincial (see Table 1). The other relevant finding is that 27% of all adult movers reported being part of a household that had experienced hunger during the previous week (compared to 21% of non-movers) (ibid.). The authors conclude that, in general, moving was associated with economic shock and hardship.

Table 1: Extent of mobility in South Africa – March and May 2020

Timing of move	% of adult population
Moved in March only	7.8
Moved in May only	4.9
Moved in both March and May	2.9
All moves	15.5
Did not move	84.5
Share of March moves that were interprovincial	51.3

Source: Posel and Casale (2021)

Ginsburg et al. (2022) argue that the pandemic increased vulnerability among South Africa's internal migrants and their households of origin as the result of

their potentially less stable employment arrangements. Their data on impact of the pandemic on migration to and from one rural migrant-sending community comes from Agincourt district in Mpumalanga Province, collected between September 2020 and March 2021. Their main finding was that the pandemic affected migration patterns in several ways. First, the proportion of rural residents initiating a migration move decreased by 11% between 2019 and 2020. Second, the share of temporary migrants returning to the community increased from 8% in 2019 to 13% in 2020. Third, three-quarters of these return migrants who were employed in 2019 were no longer employed in 2020. Of the return migrants, 49% had lost their jobs, 25% were on unpaid leave, and 18% experienced reduced pay.

In sum, all three studies indicate that there was an increase in return migration during the pandemic, but that most internal migrants (over 85%) remained in situ and did not return home from the towns and cities where they worked. This raises several additional questions that are not addressed in the literature and still need to be researched to obtain a fuller picture of pandemic livelihood disruption. First, how did migrants in the cities survive in the face of unemployment, income loss, and mobility restrictions? Second, did this situation of pandemic precarity have an impact their ability to send remittances to family members in other parts of the country? Third, were the minority who did return to their rural homes able to engage in activities that boosted their livelihoods and compensated for pandemic economic disruptions? Finally, and most relevant to this study, what were the consequences of the pandemic for the food security of internal migrants in the city? In the remainder of this paper, we address these questions drawing on data from our survey of migrants from the Eastern Cape in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Although migrants from all ethnic and language groups in the country are found in both Cape Town and Johannesburg, the survey focused on migrants from the Eastern Cape Province, which is a major migration source for both cities. The survey breakdown of households by sample area in each city is shown in Table 2. The research team loaded surveys onto tablets supplied by the MiFOOD project at the University of the Western Cape. They then administered the surveys to a migrant head of household or their representative (usually a spouse or adult child). The final sample comprised 1,733 households (Johannesburg N = 898; Cape Town N = 818).

Table 2: Spatial distribution of sample in Cape Town and Johannesburg

	N	%
Cape Town		
Langa	143	8.3
Dunoon	122	7.0
Nyanga	96	5.5
Joe Slovo	96	5.5
Gugulethu	88	5.1
Imizamo Yethu	81	4.7
Khayelitsha	75	4.3
Delft	60	3.5
Philippi	55	3.2
Other	2	0.1
	818	100.0
Johannesburg		
Thembisa	191	11.0
Alexandra Park	151	8.7
Orange Farm	121	7.0
Tshepisong	93	5.4
Soweto	84	4.8
Cosmo City	82	4.7
Randburg	65	3.7
Benoni	56	3.2
Edenvale	48	2.8
Other	24	1.5
	898	100.0

Source: Authors' own work

The survey captured data on household characteristics, income and expenditure, migration actions, remittances, pandemic impacts, and food security. Following the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, we define food security as existing when "all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 2006) This definition includes four essential dimensions of food security: (a) Availability: Sufficient quantities of food must be consistently available to individuals or households, either through production, trade, or assistance. (b) Access: People must have the means and resources to obtain appropriate food for a nutritious diet, which can be impacted by income levels, food prices, and distribution systems. (c) Utilization: Food must be properly utilized to meet dietary needs, which requires adequate sanitation, clean water, healthcare, and knowledge about nutrition and food safety. (d) Stability: There

must be a stable supply of and access to food over time, not threatened by sudden shocks (e.g., economic crises or natural disasters) or cyclical events (e.g., seasonal food shortages). In this paper, we focus on the impact of the pandemic on food access and use among internal migrants.

The research captured these dimensions of food insecurity using the following international cross-cultural scales: (a) the Lived Poverty Index (LPI), which includes a five-point Likert scale question on the frequency of going without several basic necessities, including food and fuel to cook food; (b) the Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence Indicator (HFIAP) that categorizes households on the basis of their responses to nine frequency of occurrence questions and uses an algorithm to assign them to one of four groups: food secure, mild food insecurity, moderate food insecurity, and severe food insecurity (Coates et al., 2007); and (c) the Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS), which is a proxy for the nutritional quality of the diet by capturing how many food groups (from 0 to 12) were consumed within the household in the previous 24 hours (Swindale and Bilinsky, 2006).

RESULTS

The survey respondents from the Eastern Cape in Cape Town and Johannesburg were equally split between men and women, indicating that migration flows from the region are now significantly feminized compared to the apartheid period (Hall and Posel, 2019) (see Table 3). The sample was dominated by people of working age between 30 and 50 years of age (62% of the total). Another 28% were youth under the age of 30 years. Despite the relatively mature age profile of the sample, two-thirds were unmarried, with only 17% married and another 8% cohabiting. Only 17% of the migrant households comprised nuclear families with a wife/female partner and a husband/male partner living in the same household. Another 10% were extended family households with other relatives and non-relatives present. Almost 40% of the households were female centered (a household headed by a woman without male spouse or partner present), which is consistent with the general increase in female headship in South Africa (Rogan, 2016; Posel et al. 2023). Another 35% were male centered (with a male head without a female spouse or partner present). One-third were single-person households, which was more common among females than among males.

According to Posel and Hunter (2022: 1), "solo dwelling remains associated with persistent rural–urban spatial divisions, increased migration and urbanization, continued declining marriage rates and the nature of employment." Just over 60% of the households had 2–6 members, and a smaller number (8%) was larger. Almost all the migrants had some level of schooling: 70% had attended and 41% had completed high school. Post-secondary education was rarer, although 8% had some tertiary education. The relatively low levels of educational achievement were reflected in the occupational profile of the sample. Nearly a third (30%) were manual workers before migrating, while another 18% were domestic workers and 10% were employed in the

hospitality industry. Another 19% were unemployed immediately prior to migrating from the Eastern Cape.

Table 3: Characteristics of individual migrants and migrant households

	N	%
Sex of respondents		
Male	866	50.0
Female	865	50.0
Age		
<20	2	0.1
20–29	424	38.7
30–39	574	38.9
40–49	308	20.9
50–59	137	9.3
60+	30	2.0
Marital status		
Unmarried	1,107	63.9
Married	323	18.6
Living together/cohabiting	150	8.7
Divorced/widowed/separated	145	8.3
Highest level of education		
No formal schooling	23	1.3
Primary school	121	7.0
Some high school	410	23.7
High school completed	762	44.0
Post-secondary qualification	205	11.8
Some/completed university	130	7.5
Postgraduate	6	0.3
Household structure		
Female centered	663	38.3
Male centered	600	34.6
Nuclear	299	17.3
Extended	168	9.7
Household size (number of adults)		
1 person	551	32.0

2–3 persons	605	35.1
4–5 persons	344	20.0
6+ persons	221	12.8

Source: Authors' own work

Just over one in four migrants lost their jobs in 2020 (see Table 4). The reasons included that their employers retrenched workers (39%) or closed their businesses altogether (36%). Another 17% were banned from running their informal businesses. The length of time before finding another job was significant, with one-third remaining unemployed for more than six months, another third for four to six months, and the rest for between one and three months.

Table 4: Migrant unemployment during 2020

Unemployment experience	**N**	**%**
Loss of employment in 2020		
Yes	468	27.0
No	1,265	73.0
Main reason for losing job		
Employer retrenched employees	182	38.9
Employer closed their business	170	36.3
Not permitted to operate their informal business	77	16.5
Became ill with COVID-19	16	3.4
Household members became ill with COVID-19	7	1.5
Because they returned home	4	0.9
Other	12	2.6
Length of unemployment		
More than 6 months	158	34.3
4–6 months	150	32.5
1–3 months	153	33.2

Source: Authors' own work

The disruptive impact of the pandemic on migrant life and livelihoods is clear from the responses to a series of impact statements in the survey (see Table 5). As many as 94% of respondents said that the lockdown had caused great hardship for the city's residents and 91% indicated that the pandemic had caused significant economic hardship for them and their families. Approximately 80% said that the economic conditions of their

household were worse than before the pandemic. This change of fortune meant that almost 70% remitted less to the Eastern Cape than before COVID-19.

Table 5: Perceptions of impact of COVID-19 on migrants in Cape Town and Johannesburg

	Agree %	Disagree %	Neither %
The lockdown and stay-at-home order caused great hardship to people	94.1	3.9	2.0
The pandemic caused great economic hardship for me and my family	90.7	5.2	4.1
COVID-19 has had a very negative effect on my life	85.9	8.3	5.9
The economic conditions of my household are worse now than before COVID-19	80.8	12.6	6.5
I sent less money home to the Eastern Cape because of the pandemic	69.5	11.0	19.5
COVID-19 has had a very negative effect on my life	85.9	8.3	5.9
The economic conditions of my household are worse now than before COVID-19	80.8	12.6	6.5
I sent less money home to the Eastern Cape because of the pandemic	69.5	11.0	19.5

Source: Authors' own work

One potential response to pandemic restrictions and livelihood disruptions might have been a mass exodus from the cities to the countryside, as in India. However, only 14% of the respondents had returned to the Eastern Cape, a finding consistent with earlier surveys about the level of return migration (Posel and Casale, 2021; Ginsburg et al., 2022). Being with family was easily the most important reason (mentioned by 69%) for return, followed by fear of contracting COVID-19 (20%) (see Table 6). One exception to pandemic travel restrictions was to attend a funeral, although only 6% cited this as the reason for returning. Just 16% of returnees were driven by economic necessity (loss of employment and income). A small number of returnees (7%) engaged in income-generating activity while at home, but most either did not engage in gainful economic activity (72%) or helped on the family farm (20%). Around 70% stayed at home for a month or less, which suggests that they returned as soon as the initial lockdown was relaxed or, in the case of 20%, even sooner.

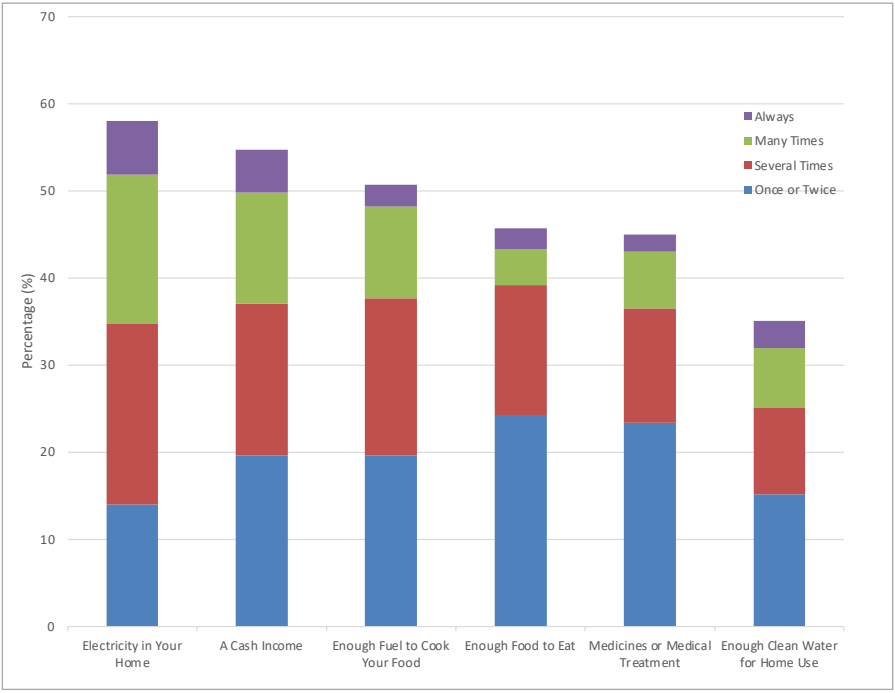
Table 6: Return migration to the Eastern Cape

	N	%
Returned to Eastern Cape		
Yes	233	14.3
No	1396	85.7
Reasons for return		
To be with family	163	69.4
Scared of catching COVID	47	20.0
Look after sick relatives	27	11.5
Unemployment/lost their job	18	7.7
No income	18	7.7
Attend funeral	15	6.4
Attend traditional ceremony	6	2.6
No food to eat	3	1.3
No housing/shelter	2	0.9
Mode of transportation		
Bus	112	42.9
Taxi	93	35.6
Car	43	16.5
Other	13	5.0
Length of time away		
3–4 weeks	108	46.0
1–2 weeks	60	25.5
1–6 months	50	21.3
>6 months	16	6.8
Economic activities while home		
None	169	71.9
Farming	47	20.0
Looked for work	22	9.4
Employed full-time	8	3.4
Bought and sold goods	7	3.0
Employed part-time	2	0.9

Source: Authors' own work

Most migrants therefore opted to remain in the cities, and pandemic economic shocks did not prompt a significant return to the Eastern Cape. Further evidence of pandemic hardships for those who stayed in Cape Town and Johannesburg is reflected in the results of the LPI, which show the frequency of the household going without six basic needs in the year prior to the survey (see Figure 1). Electricity was the most important item of deprivation experienced by almost 60% of households, likely reflecting the impact of load shedding. A cash income was forfeited by 55% of households, with 5% stating that this had always been the case and 30% reported that it happened several times. More than 45% of households had experienced the two food-related deficits. As many as 46% had gone without enough food to eat, with 3% stating that this had always been the case and 19% said that it was a frequent occurrence. Similarly, 51% of households had gone without enough fuel to cook their food, 3% always experienced it, and for 28% it was a frequent occurrence.

Figure 1: Frequency of going without basic necessities



Source: Authors' own work

The LPI results confirm that one of the main livelihood impacts felt by migrants was related to high levels of food insecurity. This was confirmed by responses to the impact statements with 88% agreeing that food had become more expensive and 86% indicated that it was more difficult to access food during the pandemic (see Table

7). Over one-third reported that they had been forced to disobey the government lockdown to obtain food to eat.

Table 7: Food-related impacts of COVID-19 on migrants in Cape Town and Johannesburg

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither (%)
Food became much more expensive during the pandemic	88.4	8.8	2.8
It was more difficult for my household to access food during the pandemic	85.9	8.7	5.4
My family and I were forced to disobey the lockdown to get food to eat	35.4	54.8	9.8

Source: Authors' own work

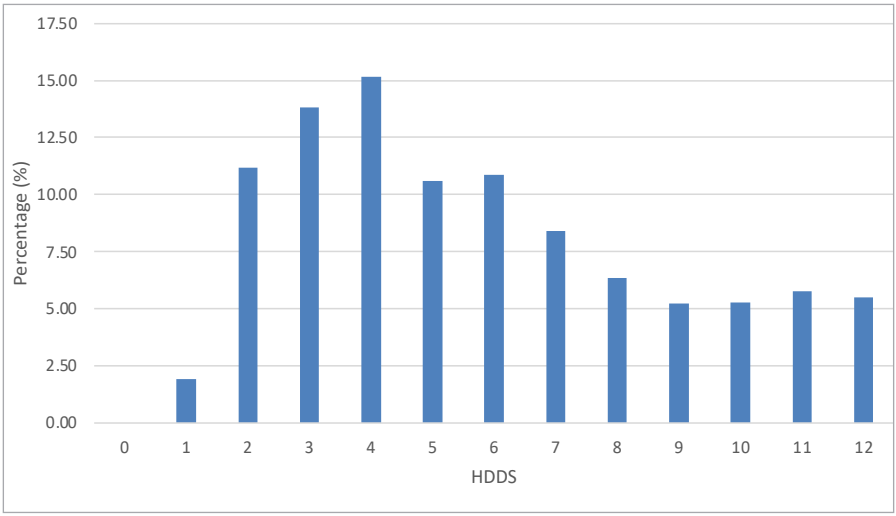
The HFIAP calculations indicate that many migrant households were still experiencing high levels of food insecurity at the time of the survey. For example, 44% of the households were food insecure and of these, more than half were severely food insecure (see Table 8). The HDDS scores of migrant households show that most were consuming a limited variety of foods (see Figure 2). More than half had a low HDDS of five or less, which generally represents a significant lack of nutritional diversity and nutritional adequacy with a heavy dependence on cereals (such as maize) and processed foods (Leroy et al., 2015). A combination of low dietary diversity and food insecurity was characteristic of more than 35% of migrant households.

Table 8: Levels of food insecurity among migrant households

Level	**N**	**%**
Food secure	963	55.6
Food insecure	761	44.4
Moderately food insecure	178	10.3
Severely food insecure	456	26.8

Source: Authors' own work

Figure 2: Distribution of HDDS scores



Source: Authors' own work

COVID-19 relief measures for South African households had the potential to mitigate pandemic hardship and food insecurity for migrant households. However, according to Moses and Woolard (2023: 170), these programs were poorly targeted and were "beleaguered by both errors of inclusion and errors of exclusion." Skinner et al. (2021: 12) conclude that "the vast majority of informal wage workers who lost their jobs in 2020 have been left without any income or only the minimal support offered through the COVID-19 [Social Relief of Distress Grant] SRD Grant." More than half (55%) of the migrant respondents reported that they had received no assistance from the government or civil society (see Table 9). Only 14% received an SRD grant. Government food packages reached fewer than 4% and only 7% saw an increase in their Child Support Grant (CSG) in 2020. The proportion of migrant households receiving cash and food assistance from nongovernmental sources was also small.

Table 9: Access to pandemic relief measures*

	N	%
No assistance	964	55.6
COVID-19 SRD Grant	248	14.3
Increase in CSG	119	6.9
Cash from a savings club	67	3.9
Government food package	61	3.5
Cash or food from a church	21	1.2
Cash or food from an NGO or charity	14	0.8
Cash or food from a political party	4	0.2

*Multiple responses

Source: Authors' own work

CONCLUSION

Previous work by migration researchers on the food security impact of the pandemic has focused almost exclusively on the experiences of international migrants in South Africa. Work on the impact of the pandemic on South Africans tends to lump migrants and non-migrants together. There are several possible reasons for these oversights. First, there is a mantra that South African urbanization is driven by permanent migration to the cities. This misleading refrain is enhanced by the argument that the perpetuation of internal migration was an apartheid-era phenomenon that would phase out with the lifting of internal controls on mobility. However, Posel (2004: 277) found that,

> … in post-apartheid South Africa, it may have been expected that circular or temporary internal labour migration would have been replaced by the permanent settlement of Africans at places of employment. However, the evidence suggests that temporary internal labour migration in the country has not declined; rather it appears to have increased, particularly because of the rise in female labour migration.

More recently, the essays in Bank et al. (2020) show that a large proportion of South Africa's population remain "double rooted" – living in urban areas, but with access to a rural homestead to which they periodically return.

Second, researchers and policymakers in South Africa typically reserve the term "migration" to describe the cross-border movement of individuals and families from other countries, a practice that minimizes and marginalizes the reality of internal migration where movements are less restricted and subject to government monitoring and regulation. The COVID-19 pandemic has shed new light on the plight of internal migrants in other countries, as governments imposed new restrictions on

internal mobility. In South Africa, the pandemic lockdown had a dramatic impact on internal migrants, although the extent of pandemic-related return to the Eastern Cape from Cape Town and Johannesburg was relatively limited. Finally, studies of the impact of the pandemic on the food security of vulnerable South Africans also fail to distinguish between non-migrants and migrants. As a result, migration status is not considered an explanatory variable that deserves collecting data or considered in analyses of pandemic impacts.

This is one of the first studies to examine the livelihood disruptions and food insecurity experience of internal migrants in South African cities during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis in this article shows that the pandemic had a measurable negative impact on the livelihoods and food security of internal migrant households in the cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg. This finding can now be tested in other contexts, particularly with migrants from source regions outside the Eastern Cape and in smaller secondary city destinations. Further analysis of the data from this survey is also in progress. It is important to assess and model the relationship between dependent variables such as the HFIAP, HDDS, and LPI, and the various individual and household characteristics that emerged in the profile of the migrant population. The article shows that there was considerable variation in both the migrant profile and the outcomes of food security. By modeling the relationship between the two, we will be able to identify which types of households were most vulnerable to food insecurity. This will assist in advance planning for the next pandemic and avoid yet another food security catastrophe (Onyango et al., 2021).

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COVID-19's Impact on Food Security among Urban Refugee Youth in Kenya: A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

This study analyzes the experiences of urban refugee communities, more specifically, the challenges young South Sudanese refugees living in Kenya face. We divert from the comprehensive examination of refugees in camps to focus on urban youth amid Kenya's refugee policy changes and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the support of South Sudanese community leaders, our study engaged 58 participants – 42 males and 16 females. Participants engaged in semi-structured discussions about food security and other daily challenges related to their urban refugee experience. This study draws on postcolonial feminist theory to contextualize the gender-specific dimensions of food insecurity, centering analysis on discussing historical power structures, migration patterns, urbanism theory, and geopolitical influences contributing to the experiences of South Sudanese urban refugee youth in Kenya. Study participants, irrespective of location, encountered corruption, limiting policies, and conflicting identity formation, with women specifically highlighting self-identity, dignity, and family as critical to supporting their resilience. Participants emphasized the impact of COVID-19 on community cohesion, particularly in shared meals. However, their agency was hindered by movement restrictions, invisible fences, or barriers exacerbated by unequal support and aid distribution. The research advocates for the formulation of clear African contextualized urban-based policies and migration systems that prioritize the needs of urban refugees, safeguarding their rights and upholding human dignity. Collaborative engagement with all stakeholders within local communities, especially refugee youth, is necessary to develop effective urban policies that promote stability, economic advancement, and social integration.

Keywords: migration, agency, sanctuary cities, gender, African urbanism

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INTRODUCTION

Global food insecurity persists significantly above pre-pandemic levels, with over 700 million people worldwide experiencing hunger in 2022 (FAO et al., 2023). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent mitigation efforts exacerbated a global crisis of immobility, disproportionately affecting migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, who experienced exasperated inequalities and increased vulnerability (Crush et al., 2021; FAO, 2021; Onyango et al., 2021).

Given these evolving trends in food insecurity and human mobility, scholars and communities have called for research to understand the full implications of COVID-19 on refugees, with a particular emphasis on understanding the unique challenges faced by different genders and ages in urban contexts (WFP, 2020; Crush et al., 2021). A substantial portion of the people experiencing food insecurity live in Africa, indicating the definitive prevalence of food insecurity in the region (UNCTAD, 2021). Considering the relationship between poverty, malnutrition, food insecurity, and gender as critical influencers of migration (FAO, 2021), examining these interconnected aspects in Kenya is crucial to addressing socio-economic and political factors from a gender perspective. Gender intersects with various aspects of migration, including access to resources, decision-making power, and exposure to vulnerabilities, with the COVID-19 pandemic intensifying gender disparities regarding economic livelihoods and food security. Our focus on Kenya is due to the increasing arrival of refugees from neighboring countries, including South Sudan (IHD, 2020). The enduring conflict in South Sudan has been detrimental to the community; prospects of repatriating to South Sudan are unattainable for many due to limited opportunity, extreme famine, and regional political instability and conflict (UNHCR, 2023).

This paper investigates the impact of COVID-19 on food security among urban refugee youth (19–32 years) in Kenya by focusing on South Sudanese refugees residing in Nairobi and Nakuru. We draw on postcolonial feminist theory, integrating race, gender, and colonization (Musingafi and Musingafi, 2023) to contextualize the gender-specific dimensions of food insecurity further and explore how urban policy can counter historical power structures, migration patterns, and geopolitical influences. This paper also builds on African urbanisms by critical African scholars to investigate the needs, challenges, and policy responses concerning urban refugee youth. We conclude by recommending the adaptation of a sanctuary cities framework.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

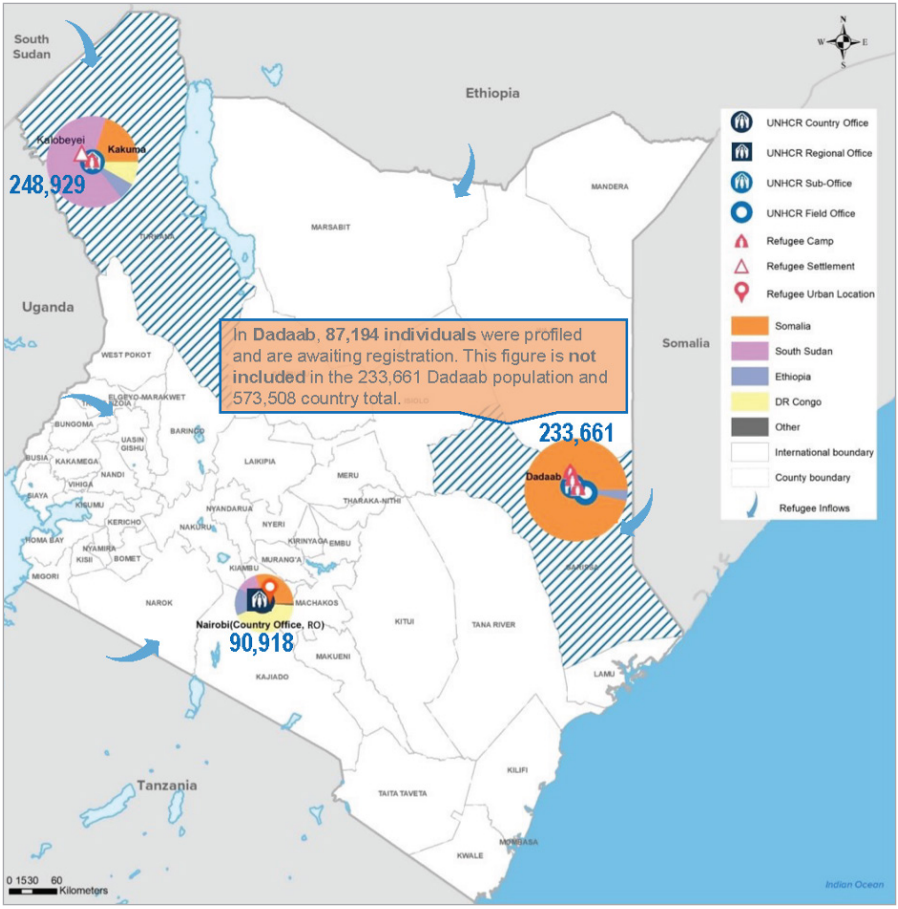
Kenya has a rich history of hosting refugees seeking safety from food insecurity, conflict, limited economic opportunities, and extreme climate conditions (WFP, 2020). The country's appeal is attributed to its centrality, available land, international networks, established migrant communities, and arable land (IHD, 2020). In Kenya, Africa's oldest and largest refugee camps are Dadaab and Kakuma, established in

1991 and 1992 respectively, home to refugees from Somalia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (IHD, 2020). Thus, much of the literature on refugees in Kenya focuses on those living in camps (Pavanello et al., 2010; IOM, 2018; Malik, 2023).

In 2006, the Government of Kenya initiated the Refugees Act, which set a framework for refugees to register and remain in camps (IHL, 2006). Since 1991, Kenya has pursued a refugee encampment policy that limited their integration and access to opportunities outside the camps. Urban refugees were not spared from such exclusionary challenges, which were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic period. However, the Government of Kenya introduced the Refugees Act of 2021, intending to address ongoing challenges in securing the rights and protections for refugees and asylum seekers by making more explicit policies that protect their right to participate in various levels of the economy and social development (UNHCR, 2021). As these changes were implemented, the Government of Kenya announced the closure of the refugee camps on several occasions with a plan for local integration and resettlement (UNHCR, 2021). The United Nations Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) of 2016 calls for integrating and including refugees into the community. However, there are risks of closing the refugee camps, with significant impacts on the surrounding settings and host communities, likely resulting in increased migration to urban centers. Therefore, understanding gaps for urban refugees is timely.

Research indicates that when refugees settled outside the camps and moved to metropolitan centers, they encountered challenging circumstances and were without the same level of support as in the camps from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other organizations. Approximately 25% (90,918) of Kenya's total refugee population resides in urban areas, with most urban refugee youth living in Nairobi (UNHCR, 2021). This rate continues to increase annually (Onyango et al., 2021). However, these numbers are believed to be much higher, as many refugees still need to register (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Kenya, Refugees by Location, 2022



Source: UNHCR Kenya – DIMA Unit, Nairobi (available on Kenya Infographics and Statistics Package – 31 July 2023 by UNCHR)

In addition to the impending forced urban migration through proposed refugee camp closures, many refugees choose to live in urban spaces rather than camps. In contrast to the relatively confined environments of refugee camps, cities offer refugees independence and potential access to economic and educational opportunities. The refugees' decision to reside in urban areas intersects with the concept of sanctuary cities, which promotes flexible and inclusive environments for migrants (Kassa, 2018). As much as a process as it is a goal, there is no single definition of what a sanctuary city is; therefore, the concept differs between regions. While cities like Nairobi and Nakuru serve as de facto sanctuary or refuge cities, they do not have formal policies and support systems akin to those in the United States and Canada, where sanctuary

cities implement migrant-friendly policies, such as providing municipal services, regardless of immigration status and limiting cooperation with federal immigration authorities (Kassa, 2018; Bauder, 2020). Despite the existence of policies and legislative Acts in Kenya, there has been difficulty translating these into actionable measures regarding the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. Consequently, Kenyan authorities and refugees alike are unclear about refugees' rights, resulting in the inaccurate application of regulatory frameworks and misclassifications (IHD, 2020). This leaves urban refugees ambiguous without assistance or legal protection from government officials, the UNHCR, or other NGOs.

Therefore, urban refugees find themselves with a different level of support than they experienced in the camps (Omata, 2020), and urban realities may need to align with their aspirations. As "non-citizens," refugees have distinctive legal and administrative constraints that limit their ability to secure formal employment and freedom of movement despite provisions in the 1951 Refugee Convention (Omata, 2020). Consequently, urban refugees are vulnerable to exploitation, apprehension, or confinement and may have to compete for opportunities (UNHCR, 2021). Lack of stable income and food insecurity often compel urban refugees to accept any available food, regardless of personal preferences or religious dietary restrictions, sometimes skipping meals to feed their children (UNHCR, 2021). Persistent food insecurity in Kenya poses substantial obstacles to adequately addressing the population's nutritional and dietary requirements, affecting more than 60% of urban refugees (Onyango et al., 2021; FAO et al., 2023). In an environment where communities perceive competing for resources – particularly in a context already strained by unemployment and food insecurity – this dynamic can potentially lead to violence, resulting in the host community retaliating against the refugee group (Elfversson et al., 2023). Despite the longstanding presence of refugees in Kenya, inequality, economic impact, political factors, and sociocultural influences have escalated tensions (Betts et al., 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As explained by the United Nations (UN), "Gender is a key organizing principle of society and is central to any discussion of the causes and consequences of international migration, including the process of decision-making involved and the mechanisms leading to migration" (IOM, 2018: 10). In reality, women and LGBTQ+ persons often find themselves in more marginalized, isolated, and vulnerable positions than men. Therefore, increasing understanding of international migration and food access through postcolonial feminist and African urbanism theories acknowledges various dynamics, expectations and relations that influence men's and women's urban migration experiences.

Postcolonial feminist theory

Postcolonial feminist theory seeks to understand how (neo)colonialism is embedded within patriarchy and globalization, particularly contemporary realities of white settler colonialism (Kerner, 2017; Piedalue and Rishi, 2017). Postcolonial feminism is a "transnational and globally constructed form of critical race feminism" (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017: 549) that requires relational thinking about power and globality to assess and address North-South power relations and asymmetries (Kerner, 2017). The concepts of North-South paradigms are based on the historical legacy of colonialism. They are intrinsically embedded with gendered and racialized features that presume that the conditions prevalent in the Global South (i.e., poverty, corruption, and gender inequality) do not apply to the Global North (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; Kerner, 2017; Piedalue and Rishi, 2017). This theoretical framework focuses on gender-related factors and the obstacles they pose to justice, equality, and well-being: postcolonial feminism calls for thinking about agency in more nuanced ways, beyond subversion and change (Kerner, 2017). The concept of "empowerment-as-information" is criticized in postcolonial feminist studies, wherein people are provided with information and knowledge under the guise of empowerment (Kerner, 2017; Bessa, 2019). "Empowerment" approaches may inadvertently burden people with the expectation to resist change-makers and challenge existing power structures. Despite being equipped with information, the structural barriers and entrenched systems surrounding them often remain unchanged, rendering them powerless to enact meaningful change in alignment with the prescribed empowerment model. By examining the historical power imbalances that continue to shape contemporary social and economic structures, this theory helps understand how urban refugees, especially youth, women and gender minorities, experience marginalization within urban environments.

African urbanism

Future global urban expansion is projected to occur mainly in Africa and Asia, where public institutions and planning systems are least prepared to manage the demands of rapidly urbanizing regions (UN-Habitat, 2022). Africa is experiencing the highest urban growth rates, with projections indicating that by 2035, half its population will be urban dwellers, increasing to six out of ten people by 2050 (UN-Habitat, 2022). Alongside this trajectory, African cities have always been refugee reception cities, deepening socio-economic fragmentation, inequity, and exclusion; high rates of unemployment; increasing levels of urban poverty; and food insecurity. Scholars increasingly acknowledge the limited applicability of Global North theories in explaining urbanism in the Global South, reflected in the ongoing epistemological debates on the nexus between sanctuary cities and urban theory and practice in the region (Ernstson et al., 2014; Kassa, 2018; Tshimba, 2022). Moreover, the specificity

of African urbanism calls for a place-based innovation of urban planning and governance based on local knowledge production (Bellaviti, 2022).

African urban theorization is evolving, with emerging scholarship aiming to establish a theory and practice that is more meaningful and functional for African city-making processes (Nyiti, 2024). Batuman and Kilinç (2024) argue that integrating urban refugees requires examining their connection through (1) identity: informality, imagination, and belonging; (2) place: transnational homemaking practices; and (3) site: navigating urban space. Within this context of African urbanism, this study aims to integrate an awareness of global diversity and universality to co-produce knowledge for progressive impacts on the urban refugee community, particularly South Sudanese youth.

METHODOLOGY

Engagement with three focus group discussions, the study investigated the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security among South Sudanese refugee youth aged 19 to 32 living in urban settings of Nairobi and Nakuru, Kenya. While the broader research focuses on food security, participants spoke about the importance of intersecting aspects of their lives that affect their ability to access services and programs; therefore, this article focuses on youth perspectives and stories related to their urban existence during and post-COVID-19.

We recruited the participants using an exponential discriminative snowball sampling method. With the support of South Sudanese community leaders, the research team conducted three focus group discussions with 58 South Sudanese urban refugee youth (42 males, 16 females) who had urban refugee status for Nairobi or Nakuru. The three focus groups comprised 28 men, 13 women, and a mixed group of 3 women and 14 men, respectively. All participants provided written informed consent. We used pseudonyms and altered any identifying information to mitigate potential risks and protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

The research team held the focus group discussions in December 2022, with each session being 60 to 120 minutes. We held all the sessions in an accessible community location in Nairobi, Kenya, and they were facilitated by a South Sudanese community leader. During the focus group sessions, the research team asked the participants open-ended questions regarding food security, including food availability. We enlisted – with participant approval – a Kenyan illustrator to observe and illustrate the key concepts and themes emerging from the sessions. The focus group discussions highlighted what food security meant to the participants, prompting a subsequent discussion about interventions and innovations with stakeholders to address food security challenges among urban refugees.

We transcribed the audio-recorded discussions, read the transcripts multiple times, and analyzed them using NVivo software. Following all ethics and safeguarding protocols, the researchers conducted community member-checking

to confirm understanding. The research team developed codes using inductive and deductive methods, drawing from the proposal, research questions, and focus group transcripts. We included South Sudanese community leaders and researchers in the design, conceptualization, and facilitation, and they provided insight into the contextual circumstances of urban refugees.

RESULTS

This section examines the impact of COVID-19 on food security among South Sudanese urban refugees residing in Nairobi and Nakuru, Kenya. We identified three major themes across the sessions, regardless of location or gender – although intersectional factors did influence the impact of these issues – namely, systemic failures with resource allocation; safety and freedom; and identity formation. When organizations provided support, such as money or supplies, participants perceived it to be distributed unequally because of a lack of transparency between refugees and the organization. The participants often attributed these issues to their identity as "urban," indicating they lacked the support their counterparts in the refugee camps were accorded. Participants explained how they strive for agency, often a core principle for moving away from the camp but were challenged by the context of Kenya's policies. As indicated earlier, we use pseudonyms throughout the article based on how participants self-identified: Urban Refugee Men (URM) and Urban Refugee Women (URW).

Systemic failures with resource allocation

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges faced by refugees residing in urban areas, bringing to the forefront the difficulties in resource allocation within humanitarian systems. The participants spoke about the significant barriers urban refugees encounter in accessing necessities such as food, shelter, education, and health care. The challenges with resource allocation in urban refugee communities had a profound impact on their ability to meet their fundamental needs. Despite the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations, many urban refugees still experience food insecurity. By exploring personal experiences and accounts of urban refugees, there is an urgent need for more equitable and efficient resource allocation strategies to address the problematic levels of food insecurity.

The participants noted that urban refugees need support from organizations like the UNHCR, similar to those living in refugee camps. They spoke about organizations and wealthy individuals providing cooking oil, soap, maize, beans, and personal protective equipment; however, the government, along with local and international organizations still need to address this significant resource gap. Organizations such as the UNHCR were discussed negatively regarding the support offered to urban refugees. A woman shared that, "Being an urban refugee is not easy because we have to do everything for ourselves. The UN doesn't support you."

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of support, particularly regarding food assistance and spoke about the frustration among refugees who rely on these entities and feel neglected. According to one respondent:

> We don't have any support here in town. Our embassy never saw us. The UNHCR … they do the assessment; they collect data that is going to be a benefit to them. But the refugees? There is nothing we can get (URW).

Participants noted a disconnect between the efforts of the UNHCR and the needs of South Sudanese refugees. Despite repeated requests for assistance and discussions about the challenges faced by the refugee community, they argued that there needs to be more tangible action or response from the UNHCR. Others felt that the Embassy of South Sudan in Kenya and the Government of Kenya should have a stronger response to meet refugees' needs. A participant shifted the responsibility from international agencies to the government, expressing concern about prioritizing citizens over refugees. He suggested that UN agencies should administer refugee services directly to ensure fairness and access to assistance:

> The service that the UN provides refugees are handled by the government. And the government's priority, everywhere in the world, is to assist its own citizens. … And there are few refugees that are involved in the management of the services that they offer. I think the best way for UN agencies is to be the one handling that service themselves, because if you give them to the national [government], the national's priority will come first (URM).

For many participants, the lack of systemic support meant they experienced hunger or could not afford to meet their basic needs. An urban refugee woman said, "I may look good, but inside, maybe I spent two to three days without food." The viewpoint of an urban refugee woman resonated with the experiences of many women responsible for their families' care, some who implemented meal programs to meet their needs:

> It reached a time where we did not even have rent, and we had to have the landlord just shut our house, like close with everything inside it. We just went to sleep at one of the relatives. We're like 13 people in the same house. You can imagine that situation, right? … You just leave the food to the young ones … we normally have a program: if we eat breakfast, we are not going to eat lunch so that we eat supper (URW).

As primary caregivers, women shared the disproportionate effect of having to navigate the complexities of urban refugee life while also managing household responsibilities, as one respondent stated:

> The kids go to school, but it is a challenge. I have to struggle up and down and find something for them to go to school. It is a big challenge. COVID-19 has challenged us … I'm working to take care of our siblings, who are also being helped by family members. And that is how I struggled to make ends meet in Nairobi (URW).

The intersecting challenges of women urban refugees in Nairobi indicate that the daily pursuit of basic needs is intertwined with the uncertainty of survival:

> Where you will get food or will you be alive tomorrow, you don't know. But it is God's grace that is the reason we are here today. Some families sleep without food for one or two days … you have a hope, but the hunger is too much. But if you don't have hope – otherwise, what can you do? (URW).

While the participant finds solace in faith, it is essential to recognize that reliance on hope and resilience should not overshadow the urgent need for systemic change: urban refugees' struggles to meet their basic needs should not be normalized or accepted as a testament to their resilience. Instead, it points to systemic failures that perpetuate conditions of extreme poverty and food insecurity among vulnerable populations. The juxtaposition of hope against the backdrop of hunger serves as a reminder of urban refugees' situation. Despite their remarkable strength in enduring these challenges, their resilience should not be romanticized.

Without systemic support, many agreed that financial support came from cash remittances from family members, the local communities, other South Sudanese, and abroad, which was also affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given their reliance on external support to survive, participants shared their concerns that support before the pandemic decreased significantly and had yet to return to its previous level:

> We suffer in silence here. We only get support from people who are relatives, maybe someone who is abroad or someone who is in South Sudan, working. To get even a proper meal is a problem. You don't die, you eat what you get; you can suffer; you will get diseases – because you're not helping the malnutrition (URW).

In contrast, a participant compared the positive support and services available to refugees in camps to those living in urban areas. Registered refugees residing in camps receive essential services, such as food and health care. While assistance disparities still exist, the participant shared that she is often left to support herself in the challenging urban environment:

> If you're registered in the camp, there's food, there's free hospital, at least there's something you're given. But being an urban refugee, the only thing that

> you're given is the status. They [the government] don't support you to support yourself (URW).

There is a disparity in support systems between urban refugees and those residing in refugee camps. This is primarily because refugees in camps are entitled to humanitarian aid and other support systems. However, during focus group sessions, participants indicated that the government tends to prioritize support for refugees within camps, possibly due to logistical reasons or a preference for containing refugee populations in designated areas. While registration as a refugee provides legal recognition, it does not guarantee access to essential services or support for self-sufficiency in urban areas. The UNHCR (2016) and other agencies have plans to scale up services to urban refugees. Still, the study participants were not aware of the proposed initiative (see UNHCR, n.d.) and certainly had yet to be consulted about their needs at the time of the study. In light of this reflection, placing the burden of self-sufficiency for refugees in urban areas is unjust and unsustainable. There is an urgent need to address the root causes of food insecurity and poverty, including inadequate access to resources, employment opportunities, and social support systems, which perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalization among urban refugee populations.

Safety and freedom

While safety entails protection from violence, discrimination, and persecution, freedom extends beyond the mere absence of harm to include the ability to exercise fundamental rights, such as freedom of movement, access to livelihood opportunities, and the autonomy to pursue economic endeavors. From navigating restrictive legal frameworks to overcoming socio-economic barriers, urban refugees deal with complex dynamics shaping their goals for safety and realizing their rights to freedom in urban environments.

From the onset of conflict in South Sudan to the COVID-19 pandemic, refugees have experienced complex obstacles in their pursuit of safety, stability, and autonomy during the asylum-seeking process and resettlement:

> Life has been uneasy in South Sudan when the war broke out, up to today. Many people are suffering in urban centers. It's not easy for us people in urban areas, because there are so many murders happening, especially now; poor people have been murdered because Kenyans feel [poverty] as well (URM).

While there are shared issues among the focus groups, societal and cultural factors affect how each gender experiences challenges. While both men and women mentioned security as a challenge, women were particularly noted as being more vulnerable to kidnappings. However, the participants did not elaborate on who was kidnapping the women. Urban refugee women described a pervasive atmosphere of fear and mistrust experienced in their daily lives: "You just need to survive on your

own; you need to find ways to survive. Everybody's paranoid." For some URW, this fear was justified, as a participant described a dangerous theft where basic safety and security in urban spaces are far from guaranteed:

> We had an event in town, and we went home … [thieves] just took my phone. I just gave it to them and so that they walk away. I could have been shot. They're walking out with knives; they try to come behind you. It's very risky nowadays (URW).

Many of the URM spoke about a sense of community, solidarity, and generosity with their Kenyan neighbors during the COVID-19 pandemic. They talked about coming together to share meals, support each other, and create a sense of home away from home. In contrast, a woman shared that "Kenyans are not that friendly. Okay, they're friendly but not helping …" This is a notable difference from the strong community integration men experienced. An urban refugee woman shared that the reluctance of neighbors to interact with her out of fear reflects the lack of trust and social cohesion toward women within the community:

> It was not easy to get assistance because everybody was scared. A neighbor might think you're getting to the house to give them [COVID-19] because they didn't know where you've been. Most people were isolated … It was hard (URW).

Moreover, social dynamics are further complicated by bureaucratic regulations, which constrain refugees' freedom of movement and choice of residence. Participants spoke about the numerous bureaucratic barriers and challenges they face living in urban spaces and, in some cases, scrutiny and accusations of illegality by authorities. The restrictive nature of these policies limits refugees' access to alternative support networks, effectively confining them to specific areas and restricting opportunities for socio-economic advancement available in urban centers:

> It became a real challenge because I am a refugee registered under the UN in the Kakuma refugee camp. Getting assistance here in Nairobi, as a refugee, it gets hard because we cannot be assisted unless we are in the camp (URW).

Urban refugees face limitations in exercising their freedom and pursuing self-sustainability in their host country. Despite the fact that the Refugee Act of 2021 entitles refugees to legal documents that they need to participate in income-generating activities, the participants spoke about challenges when attempting to open a business for economic self-sufficiency. Despite their desire to contribute to the local economy and support themselves, refugees often encounter legal and bureaucratic barriers that prevent them from doing so, as narrated by this participant:

> In Kenya, we are refugees. Now, for example, if you try to open a shop somewhere to do your own business to sustain yourself, you can't do it in Kenya … if there could be a way that can help South Sudanese to do their own business, it could be better for us (URM).

A broader pattern of exclusion and discrimination against urban refugees is demonstrated, denying them equal access to basic services and opportunities available to other members of society. Similarly, the inability to open a bank account deprives them of financial freedom, limiting their ability to manage their finances, save money, and engage in economic activities independently – reinforcing their dependence on external assistance:

> There was an agreement of where the UN and the Kenya government had where refugees can open any bank account so that you can save. But now it got to a point when you're going there with your alien card. And they tell, they say like, "No, it's only for the Kenyan or foreigners." Refugees are not allowed in (URW).

Before their asylum-seeking journeys, many refugees held jobs and pursued careers in various fields. However, upon arrival in host countries, they often need help finding employment opportunities matching their qualifications and experience. Many refugees possess a wealth of skills and experience underutilized in their host countries. As urban refugees become more economically independent, they are better positioned to support local businesses, contribute to the tax base, and stimulate economic growth. Further, these initiatives help bridge social divides and promote social cohesion by facilitating integration and participation in host communities. Yet their success is contingent upon comprehensive support and collaboration from governments, NGOs, and local communities, who must work to address these barriers.

Adding to the challenges urban refugees face are bureaucratic barriers and residency requirements severely limiting their freedom to reside and seek assistance. These restrictions impede their access to essential services and support systems, exacerbating their already precarious situation. The denial of equal access to basic services and the imposition of restrictions on economic activities perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and discrimination against urban refugees. These barriers make it exceedingly difficult for them to achieve economic self-sufficiency, reinforcing the cycle of dependency. However, initiatives aimed at supporting refugees in using their skills and experience to support themselves and contribute to their communities have the potential to disrupt these current practices.

Identity formation

Given the challenges associated with being an urban refugee, the question of why individuals would choose to leave the relative safety and stability of refugee camps remained. While these camps may provide basic safety and access to humanitarian aid, participants from the focus groups shared how refugees living in camps were perceived to have less autonomy than their urban refugee peers. Thus, for many refugees, the prospect of seeking a better life in urban areas, despite the accompanying risks and uncertainties, may offer more opportunities for education, employment, and social integration that are not readily available in refugee camps.

The participants shared the challenge that they, just as much as everyone else, want to live a life where they can achieve agency rather than being confined in a camp for the rest of their lives:

> I just wanted to explore, you know? Just to be. As a refugee, it doesn't mean that you have to be in the camp. You also have to meet people, interact and expand your brain because you cannot be born as a refugee and die at 13. You don't know Nairobi, you don't know Nakuru … You want to explore; you want to meet people, but then that status of being a refugee, your alien card – you just have to beg. I have friends who went to [country] … they sent me money to go to university. And that's how I finished my university [qualification]. If they did not do that, I will be in the camp right now … all my life in the camp (URW).

Concurrently, the urban refugees wanted to challenge ideas about how others perceive them in the context of receiving systemic support. A participant critiqued the prevailing notion that refugees must conform to a stereotypical image of helplessness to receive assistance from organizations:

> You don't have to look like a beggar for somebody to help you. That's the problem with the UN and the rest of the world. They want to see refugees as refugees in the camp … nobody will come and help you because you don't even look helpless. You have to look helpless. Like if somebody sees me dressed up like this, they don't think I'm a refugee because I don't want to look like one. And a refugee doesn't have to be in dirty clothes or out there in the street for UNHCR to come (URW).

The woman highlighted the conflicting dynamics between asserting her agency and accessing the resources and support she needs. Additionally, she exposed the inherent biases embedded within humanitarian aid systems that assess visible markers of vulnerability within preconceived notions of helplessness and dependency over the actual experiences of urban refugees.

An urban refugee man alluded to the power dynamics and structural inequalities embedded within the refugee experience. The authorities' refusal to recognize the presence of refugees in urban areas reflects a colonial mindset that seeks to control and confine displaced populations to designated spaces, perpetuating a hierarchical system that marginalizes certain groups based on their status and identity. He expressed himself thus:

> The [authorities] told me that "You are a refugee, you are not getting in Nairobi, you are for a refugee camp, you are for Kakuma." … I feel that you, if you are in Kenya, you are entitled to be assisted (URM).

For many, their identity formation and sense of belonging in urban spaces are determined by how Kenyans or those in their communities perceive them; they are made to feel like outsiders in their communities. The experience of being questioned about their right to be in a specific location contributes to the stigmatization, systemic barriers, and discrimination refugees experience, as related by this respondent:

> You show the [alien card], they will tell you, "Yes, you're a refugee, but you should be somewhere else, not here, around here. What gives you the permission to come and stay here as student?" … even though they know who you are, an urban refugee … It really disadvantaged refugees' progression here (URM).

Within refugee camps, individuals often find themselves confined to predefined roles and identities, such as being in a constant state of helplessness, primarily defined by their status as displaced persons. Beyond the economic opportunities, urban environments offer greater opportunities for self-expression, social interaction, and cultural exchange, allowing urban refugees to explore and redefine their identities beyond the confines of their displacement status. Thus, the decision to leave refugee camps and pursue life in urban areas can be understood as a proactive step toward identity reconstruction and self-affirmation in the face of displacement and marginalization. Moreover, the narratives highlight the intersectional nature of identity formation, as urban refugees navigate complex layers of identity, including gender, race, nationality, and displacement status, in exploring recognition and agency within the host community.

Figure 2: Focus Group Responses and Recommendations

Source: Illustrated by Sherald Elly, 2022

When discussing solutions to resource allocation, safety, and freedom challenges, many suggested solutions that supported refugees, providing them with greater autonomy. Suggestions included having the South Sudanese ambassador(s) and political leaders who are connected with or living in Kenya more involved with the urban refugee population and supporting refugee-led organizations in Nairobi to make it easier for refugees to access basic services (See Figure 2). Participants also suggested that it would be beneficial to learn how neighboring countries like Uganda support refugees in general, rather than just in emergencies. Funding small-business start-ups was also a suggestion that would increase the agency of refugees and allow them to afford food rather than rely on support, reinforcing dependency.

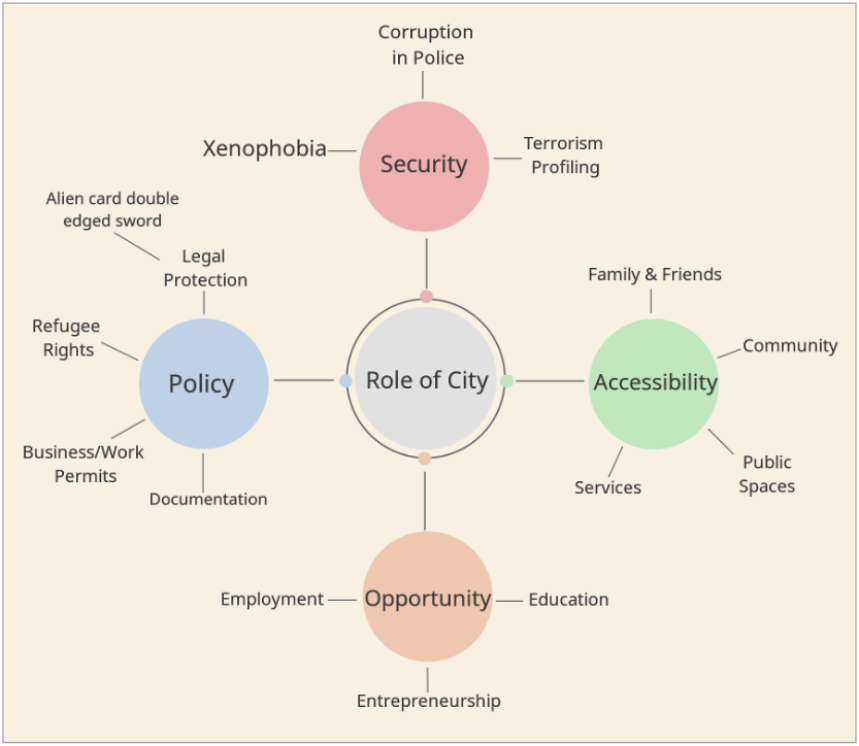
DISCUSSION

This study used postcolonial feminist and African urbanism theories to understand the experiences of South Sudanese refugees in Nairobi and Nakuru following the impacts of COVID-19 to identify areas for intervention and change. The importance of the intersecting and urban spatial nature of these issues became evident during the engagements with participants: food security has a severe impact on various dimensions of urban refugees' lives, including human dignity, social equity, and community well-being. The analysis emphasizes the systemic inequalities and policy-related structural barriers perpetuating food insecurity. Participants' narratives exemplify the complex socio-political dynamics affecting refugee experiences and varying agencies in urban settings.

Urban refugees are at the intersection of multiple power structures, including those embedded within their host communities, governmental institutions, and humanitarian organizations. While "empowerment" initiatives may aim to provide refugees with knowledge and resources to navigate their circumstances, they sometimes overlook the structural inequalities and systemic barriers that limit refugees' ability to exercise genuine agency and autonomy. Urban refugees receive information or assistance from humanitarian organizations or government agencies that aim to "empower" them by providing knowledge about their rights, available services, or avenues for legal status. This approach may inadvertently reinforce existing power hierarchies and maintain the status quo for urban refugee youth without addressing the underlying power dynamics and structural inequalities that perpetuate their marginalization (Kerner, 2017; Bessa, 2019). This "empowerment" results in a gap between the information provided and the actual ability to access resources or exercise rights such as access to health care or education. Still they may face obstacles such as discrimination, language barriers, or lack of documentation when trying to access these services.

Similarly, they may receive information about legal pathways for obtaining residency or employment but encounter bureaucratic hurdles or hostile attitudes from authorities that prevent them from exercising these rights effectively. Thus, it is critical to consider the broader socio-political and urban spatial context (Alawneh and Mahbub, 2022) in which urban refugee youth navigate their lives. The following diagram (see Figure 3) illustrates critical sanctuary policy areas that emerged from the analysis of the focus group interviews.

Figure 3: Emerging Sanctuary City Policy Areas



Source: Conceptualized by Abbey Lin

This now brings the realization of the need to support urban refugees, particularly women, gender minorities, and youth, through using participatory planning that integrates concepts that may be more relevant in the localized African context and in harmony with the philosophy of ubuntu (humanity) (Bauder et al., 2023). Consequently, there is a need to reevaluate the urban role and inclusion of refugees living in cities. Emerging scholars on African urbanism highlight the city's role as a refuge or sanctuary, referencing the contributions of urban refugee youth as co-producers of city spaces (Nyiti, 2024). While "sanctuary cities" are often used to describe policies and practices implemented by cities in the Global North to support vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers (Mascareñas and Eitel, 2019; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2020), rarely are sanctuary cities discussed or contextualized in the Global South, even though 85% of displaced people worldwide are hosted in the Global South (IRC, 2020), and the majority of displaced people worldwide live in urban spaces (IRC, 2022b). Urban municipalities can play a fundamental role in supporting asylum seekers and refugees, mitigating exclusionary national policies to solve issues regarding integration, accommodation, work, and education and

reshaping the notion of citizenship itself (Bauder and Gozalex, 2018). Within this context of African urbanism, this study aimed at the co-production of knowledge with the aim of progressive impacts on the affected urban community – the South Sudanese refugees.

Figure 4: Gender-Responsive Urban Refugee Policy Framework

Source: Authors' own work

The pandemic revealed and exacerbated the fault lines in the refugee support system (Enns et al., 2024), highlighting a worsening of urban refugee economic status (Oyekale, 2022). It is critical to develop urban policies that reflect the insights of youth to address the risk of redrawing both visible and invisible boundaries around urban refugee populations. An adapted and contextualized sanctuary city framework could facilitate policies that give full effect to equitable socio-economic rights contained in the Kenya Refugee Act of 2021 (see Figure 4). In a recent unpublished presentation by IRC, a critical comment is that provision in the Refugee Act 2021 28(4) that states that "refugees shall be enabled to contribute to the economic and social development of Kenya" and "a refugee recognized under this Act shall have the right to engage individually or in a group, in gainful employment or enterprise, or to practice a profession or trade where he holds qualifications recognized by competent authorities in Kenya," leaves too much room for interpretation (IRC, 2022a). Furthermore, there are still restrictions on where undocumented refugees can live, with many of the supports, policies, and laws not yet in line with the Refugee Act 2021. Kassa (2018) states that urban refugees use agency to overcome barriers and challenges, and concepts such as sanctuary cities strengthen and recognize the

agency of youth as co-producers of urban spaces and their insights for addressing challenges with an outcome of greater spatial justice for all residents (Enns, 2022).

As a form of a post-script, a new participatory phase of the research has been initiated, including urban refugee youth participants' access to a digital food social enterprise platform and ongoing engagement with political leaders and stakeholders to drive positive urban integration. The authors envision an urban future where refugees are recognized not as a burden but as valuable contributors to developing food-secure host cities, especially during periods of protracted conflict and intersecting crises such as pandemics, conflict, and climate change. William Kolong, a co-author, South Sudanese peace advocate, and focus group facilitator, shared the research study report (Enns et al., 2024) with officials from the South Sudanese and Kenyan governments, including the president's office in South Sudan. The study findings prompted immediate actions by the South Sudanese government to address some of the challenges related to documentation faced by South Sudanese urban refugees in Kenya (see Lin, 2024); a response that has the potential to be applied to other refugee groups and in different national contexts, particularly in a context of interlocking challenges or period of "polycrisis" (Janzwood and Homer-Dixon, 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Historically, the UNHCR and the Kenyan government focused resources on refugees living in refugee camps, which leaves those who choose to exit the camps without much support and vulnerable to marginalization by local authorities. Before 2021, Kenya's 2006 Refugee Act required refugees to stay within camps. Still, with the proposed closure of the camps, the 2021 Refugee Act now moves away from encampments to more integrated "urban settlement areas" for refugees, including turning refugee camps into integrative refugee settlements, which poses the question of whether emerging urban structures are any different than restricting refugees within a camp (see Halakhe and Omondi, 2024). More research is required on emerging forms of containment and the continued limited agency of refugees in movement, support, and choice in urban residential locations (Leghtas and Kitenge, 2022). The concept of the city or urban communities as a camp is not new, and without a strong urban policy in line with a contextualized "sanctuary city," the walls or fences, albeit invisible, may pose an even harsher reality for refugees.

Furthermore, in Kenya, challenges such as corruption among local authorities and harsher national policies pose additional obstacles for urban refugees in these sanctuary cities (Kassa, 2018). However, integration can be strengthened through policies that help support positive experiences for migrants (Kassa, 2018). While urban sanctuary policies do not necessarily eliminate the illegalization of displaced people (Bauder, 2017), they can, if contextualized and resourced, enable refugees to cope better with their circumstances through a flexible combination of legal, scalar, and identity-formative aspects.

Finally, there is a need to listen to the stories and insights of those most affected by emerging policy and planning responses as critical in shaping more just urban structures and informing an urban framework for potentially addressing the complex, intersecting systemic barriers each urban refugee encounters. Integration of targeted support to shift the narrative from refugee support to refugee contribution is required in this period of "polycrises." Urban refugee youth are already place-making and city-building, and local governments should look to invest in refugee youth-led organizations that have proven to be successful in similar contexts (see UNICEF, 2023; Enns and Kombe, 2023). For example, many women who participated in our research were prepared and equipped to establish a formal business to sustain an income. A simple shift to facilitate business permits more efficiently could make this a reality. Our study findings indicate the need and desire for a movement toward social integration within Kenyan communities where the benefits of urban refugees to larger society can be widely understood, and mutual respect can be established. Understanding the lived experiences of South Sudanese urban refugee youth in Nairobi and Nakuru can work toward building a foundation on which to design and implement policies and programs that protect and uphold refugee rights and promote full participation in an urban society.

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Refugee Protection and Food Security in Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract

This study reviews the governance of Kampala's food system and refugee protection approach in order to propose strategies to recognize and protect the food security needs of Kampala's refugee population more effectively. Uganda is Africa's largest refugee host, with a policy approach that has been widely lauded for its flexible settlement provisions and commitment to durable solutions. However, growing refugee populations and underfunding have led to serious pressures, severely exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. One unique aspect of Uganda's refugee governance approach is the allowance of refugee populations to self-settle outside of designated camps in the capital city, Kampala. This research uses a governance lens to explore what is being done to support the food security of this group, by whom, and how this could be improved. The researcher conducted interviews with asylum seekers and refugees living in two of Kampala's large informal settlements (Kisenyi II and Namuwongo) and with a range of policy stakeholders during May 2023. Multiple levels of government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offer overlapping formal and informal services and programs accessible to different populations living in settlements. This paper points to gaps and limitations linked to resources, as well as difficulties identifying vulnerable populations, locating political responsibility, coordination, and weak policy implementation, and suggests governance strategies to respond better to refugee and asylum seekers' food security needs. Key recommended responses are to overhaul the refugee registration system, recognize and protect urban food security, and improve policy actor coordination through collaborative strategies that move beyond awareness of the crisis to setting specific targets and timelines to address it.

Keywords: refugees, urban food security, self-settlement, Kampala, Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa with an estimated 1.6 million refugees and asylum seekers (UN-Habitat, 2023). This number has tripled in the last decade and actual numbers are certainly much higher. The 2006 Refugee Act and 2010 Refugee Regulations grant refugees rights to the same social services as Ugandans, including health care and free primary education, as well as rights to live

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and work in designated areas. Refugees are not recognized legally if they live in cities other than Kampala, which has become the central destination outside of camps. There are an estimated 137,000 refugees living in Kampala (UNHCR, 2024).

Like many low-income countries, Uganda is experiencing "urbanization without industrialization" (Gollin et al., 2016: 38), accompanied by growing inequality. Poverty is straining resources and services with few avenues for citizens or migrants to advance economically. In informal settlements migrants are disproportionately exposed to a cycle of risks and vulnerabilities: homelessness, illness, violence, poor-quality water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and unemployment. All of these contribute to food insecurity, which in turn reinforces the other vulnerabilities (Frayne et al., 2010). Conditions have worsened as the result of underfunding, rising numbers of urban poor, and pandemic-related factors. Uganda's COVID-19 response was among the most restrictive in the world (Datzberger et al., 2022; Khisa and Rwengabo, 2023), and the economic and social burdens of this fell most heavily on the poorest and most vulnerable residents, leading to heightened food insecurity (Atamanov et al., 2022).

Based on interviews with policy stakeholders, refugees and asylum seekers in Kampala held in May 2023, this paper reviews existing governance supports, refugees' experiences accessing them, and proposes how food security could be addressed better through reformed policy, stakeholder coordination, and more focused attention to recognizing and protecting urban food security. After an overview of research methods, followed by a literature review, this analysis turns to a discussion of government and non-governmental organization- (NGO) led governance responses, including those linked to local governance and COVID-19 responses. It concludes by pointing to challenges and gaps and proposing recommendations.

Multiple levels of government and NGO-sector actors offer overlapping formal and informal services and programs accessible to different populations living in urban settlements. Despite these numerous governance strategies in place, gaps and limitations linked to resources, difficulties in identifying vulnerable populations, coordination, locating political responsibility, and weak policy implementation limit effectiveness. This research study suggests several governance strategies to respond more effectively to refugee and asylum seekers' food security needs. These responses include an overhaul of the refugee registration system, targeted policy to recognize and protect urban food security, and improved policy actor coordination through collaborative strategies that move beyond awareness of the crisis to setting specific targets and timelines to address it.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study seeks to understand current efforts to recognize and protect the food security needs of Kampala's international forced migrant population and propose ways of improvement. It employed a qualitative research design, which included several tools to gather insights from experienced stakeholders through an intentional

strategy of co-productive and community-engaged research. These tools included a stakeholder workshop, Qualtrics (an online survey tool) surveys, and in-person interviews. In addition, the researcher undertook a review of the relevant literature, including legislation and policy documents from government and non-governmental governance stakeholders prior to conducting fieldwork in Kampala. The literature used in this study is accessible in a document shared with interested stakeholders who participated in this study and who also have the authority to add to this document.

A stakeholder research workshop with 11 participants was held at Makerere University on 15 May 2023. This brought together three groups: academic researchers, government representatives from national, local, and municipal offices, and NGO leaders. All these individuals are directly engaged with research, policy and advocacy related to asylum-seeker and refugee settlement in Kampala. The workshop provided an overview of the research project and its goals, followed by discussions on food security in Kampala (drivers, barriers, needs, opportunities, and support for different populations in informal settlements) and on mixed-migrant populations in Kampala (identifying and responding to changing needs). Participants reviewed the proposed research tools (in particular, the interview questions for migrants), offered inputs, and made suggestions of additional stakeholders to survey or interview. All participants were later provided with a report summarizing the central points, conclusions, and key questions that emerged at this workshop, and were encouraged to add additional information to the document. The researcher shared details of how interested participants could collaborate in research outputs and future projects. This workshop was facilitated and organized with the support of Peter Kasaija, a PhD candidate at Makerere University. He also assisted with setting up many of the stakeholder interviews and hiring two additional research assistants (Derrick Kirabo and Irene Nantalaga), who translated during migrant interviews.

The researcher disseminated a Qualtrics survey to individuals in academic, policy, donor, and NGO positions connected with the governance and policies related to food security and migrant populations in Kampala and received 20 responses. The survey asked respondents for details, assessments of, and priorities relating to (1) their insights of the programs and support mechanisms available to migrants living in Kampala; (2) their views of the main barriers faced by migrants for attaining food security; and (3) their suggestions for improving migrant populations' food security.

The research team held 15 policy stakeholder interviews of approximately one hour each with individuals or small groups from the same office or organization. These participants work in government (local or national) or with NGOs in positions related directly to forced migrant populations, food security, and urban settlement governance. Interviews expanded on the same topics as the surveys, seeking to understand the existing – as well as the required – strategies, programs and support mechanisms available to food insecure migrant populations in Kampala. Three interviews were held on Zoom rather than in person because of scheduling difficulties. The researcher later shared draft transcripts of interviews with participants, who

had the opportunity to edit the content, where necessary. Four of the participants in the stakeholder interviews are refugees themselves, employed by NGOs supporting refugee populations in Kampala.

An additional set of interviews took place with migrants living in Kampala. The research team conducted these open-ended semi-structured interviews with 11 migrants living in two of the largest informal settlements, Kisenyi II and Namuwongo. A social worker from the NGO, Slum Aid Project facilitated five interviews in Kisenyi II, while a social worker from the local NGO, Hands for Hope Uganda facilitated the remaining six in Namuwongo; two Ugandan research assistants aided in translation during interviews. Interview questions focused on when and why migrants came to Kampala and their experiences with accessing adequate nutritious and culturally appropriate food, and knowledge of and access to different government and non-governmental services and support. Six of the 11 migrants interviewed were international forced migrants, although only two had registered officially as refugees.

The researcher selected this research design to meet specific goals. While there is extensive literature detailing the formal governance – legislation and programs provided by the government, donors, and NGO partners – related to refugee protection in Uganda, there is a dearth of studies focused on food security. In this study, discussions, surveys, and interviews with stakeholders involved directly in the research topic – including migrants themselves – provided a deeper understanding of governance priorities and effectiveness, and an opportunity to emphasize the centrality of food security to urban governance actors. Migrant interviews were central for learning about the lived experiences and priorities of the group this research seeks to support. The initial workshop, the shared documents (interview transcripts, workshop report, and scoping literature), and the invitations to co-author research outputs were motivated by a desire for inputs from those intimately familiar with the practice of governance in this area of research. Additionally, there was keen interest to expand research collaboration opportunities within, between, and outside existing academic, government, and NGO networks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review serves to identify the value of adopting a governance lens for this case study and also to review existing research on and to contextualize the importance of the governance of urban food security and Uganda's refugee protection approach.

Governance

This research poses three governance-related questions: What is being done to support food security for refugees in Kampala? Who supports this endeavor? How can it be improved? The COVID-19 pandemic worsened food security for low-income

residents of Kampala, but especially for refugees and asylum seekers (Atamanov et al., 2022; Squarcina, 2023), rendering this research focus even more pressing.

This study used a governance approach to identify formal and informal processes by which government and non-governmental entities act. This approach was adopted because "understanding actual urban governance processes, which are essentially about how different actors interact to make and operationalize decisions, is vitally important" (Smit, 2018). Governance is the practice of governing, whether by the government or other formal and informal institutions and actors (Rhodes, 2007). These actors include stakeholders not directly connected to any government institutions, for example, global governance actors (such as the United Nations, World Bank, and bilateral donors) and NGOs (Boas, 1998). Governance facets include efficiency, authority, accountability, networks, process and outcomes, all of which can be assessed independently.

Governance operates with coordinated, autonomous, and sometimes competing actors and institutions working in networks characterized by power imbalances and is thus inherently political, rather than simply technical (Rakodi, 2001). Different levels and networks of governance interact formally and informally, mediated by structural factors such as entrenched norms and behaviors. A focus on how governance actors can partner, cooperate, and share mutual learning opens possibilities for more effective governance, particularly when resources are limited. A governance approach is also attuned to how political barriers can restrict effective governance and inclusive outcomes.

The expanded use of a governance approach has led to specific types of governance analyses, for example, health governance (Dodgson et al., 2009), environmental governance (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006), and food governance (Candel, 2014). Governance decisions and practices have a direct impact on refugees' access to rights, services, and food in Kampala, and this study considers the intersection of urban food governance and refugee protection governance, with particular attention to policy, programming, coordination, and outcomes.

Urban food security

In Africa, food insecurity in urban settings is largely an issue of access (Maxwell, 1996; Frayne et al., 2010; Hemerijckx et al., 2022). The most immediate contributor to food insecurity in urban informal settlements is poverty, as food must be purchased regularly and predicably on the open market (Smit, 2016). Food is the biggest expenditure for the poor (World Bank, 2022), and informal food markets are essential for both employment and food access for the city's most vulnerable (Glatzel, 2017). Urban food system governance – relating to food retail, food production, and food safety – has a direct impact on food security (Smit, 2016).

Urban food security is further dependent on a range of less direct and overlapping variables. Safe food preparation and retail are reliant on access to clean water and sanitary environments (Momberg et al., 2021). Conditions to enable

work, housing, credit, security, skills training, health care, and childcare are all essential for food security to be achieved, especially for women (Lokuruka, 2021; Dinku et al., 2023). A lack of access to familiar foods further contributes to food insecurity (Chikanda et al., 2020). In all these related areas, refugees face greater hurdles than citizens (WFP, 2020). In Africa, including in Uganda, there is little recognition of urban hunger as a policy problem, and food security is treated primarily as a rural food production issue (Crush and Riley, 2017). However, during the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdowns, the sharp spike in food insecurity prompted some temporary social protection interventions to respond directly to urban hunger (D'Errico et al., 2024).

Neither Uganda in general nor Kampala in particular has a clear policy framework to address urban hunger. Food security is addressed through a productivist agricultural supply lens focused on availability (Brown, 2014). In line with this focus, there are policy provisions for urban agriculture (Merino et al., 2021). However, the impacts of urban agriculture for improving urban food security for the poor in African cities have been shown to be limited (Crush et al., 2011; White and Hamm, 2014; Frayne et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2020). Food systems governance thus primarily occurs indirectly, with many of the government's policy priorities informed by modernist urban planning biases (Lawhon et al., 2022), rather than the need to tackle urban hunger (Kamara and Renzaho, 2014), or to recognize the important contributions of informal retail (Young, 2018) and informal housing (McCordic and Frayne, 2017) to food security. NGOs play an important role advocating for and supporting Kampala's vulnerable food-insecure populations (Richmond et al., 2018; Kyohairwe and Karyeija, 2024), including asylum seekers (Larsson, 2022). This research seeks to integrate some of their contributions and insights into this governance analysis.

Uganda's refugee protection approach

Uganda's refugee approach has been viewed as a progressive model by many (The Economist, 2016; World Bank, 2016; UNDP, 2017), because it seeks to create more inclusive opportunities for durable solutions than found in more widespread refugee responses. Its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF, 2018) has been applauded as an example of participatory governance (Zapata, 2023). Uganda's strategy is designed to increase political, economic, and social rights for asylum seekers as well as balance socio-economic opportunities for citizens and refugees (Mastrorillo et al., 2024). This progressive approach is a source of both national pride and regional leadership status (Betts, 2021). However, it is no longer achieving its goals, due to under-resourcing and the steep rise in numbers of asylum seekers (Betts, 2021; Grzeskowiak 2023; NRC, 2023).

Central to Uganda's approach is the promotion of refugee self-reliance, whether refugees are in rural camps or self-settled in Kampala. Where possible, refugees who are residents in one of Uganda's 28 designated rural settlements (the

preferred nomenclature to camps) are given a plot of land to cultivate, and they can also lease land and start businesses. Because in practice many refugees do not return to their countries of origin within months or even after a few years but stay for decades or generations (Kadigo and Maystadt, 2023), economic self-sufficiency benefits refugees, host communities, and funders. Ideally, self-reliance not only reduces support costs but contributes to economic growth. Goals of cultural assimilation are also part of this strategy (Kalu et al., 2021).

In practice, this is not straightforward, as land is not available in all locations, and what is available may not be arable (Grzeskowiak, 2023; REACH, 2023). Many encampments are provisional, basic, and without infrastructure (Grzeskowiak, 2023). While some refugees resort to farming or engage in small businesses, most are unemployed and dependent on support from the government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), NGOs, family, and friends (Addaney, 2016). As settlement populations have grown, and international funding has been slashed (UNHCR, 2022a), life has grown increasingly difficult, and conditions have been steadily worsening for the last decade, as the result of flooding, overcrowding, and severe underfunding (Mastrorillo et al., 2024). In 2023 the budget for Uganda's UNHCR programs was cut to 39% of its needs (Alfani and Eggers, 2023). Three quarters of designated settlement residents cannot access the minimum requirements to be food secure and thousands of children are severely undernourished (Guyson, 2024).

Self-settlement in Kampala is the alternative legal option, but this means waiving camp supports, including food rations. In Kampala refugees are free to work, including starting their own business. Further, refugees can participate in civic life, with rights to vote and stand for office at the local level. Urban self-settlement works as a pressure valve for under-resourced and overpopulated camps: refugees have the option to leave and try their luck in the capital. One NGO leader interviewed in this study explained, "They can go hungry in the camps, or they can be hungry in Kampala, but here [in Kampala] they have more agency" (Interview on 18 May 2024, Kampala). Many new arrivals head directly for Kampala from the border, without stopping at reception centers (Dombio and Namara, 2024). Refugees from some locations, particularly the Horn of Africa but also from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), may have the economic assets and connections to thrive in Kampala, and there are many successful business enterprises that attest to this (Monteith and Lwasa, 2017). Those who have some combination of economic assets, marketable skills, support networks, and who can speak Luganda do significantly better than in camps. For these individuals, self-settlement is clearly a better option than being restricted to a camp, but even for skilled refugees there is widespread confusion around what kinds of work permits are needed, barring refugees from access to formal-sector employment (Tshimba, 2022). This study reviews the challenges international forced migrants experience

in Kampala, with attention to the impacts of government and NGO governance practices linked to food insecurity.

GOVERNANCE RESPONSES

Different levels of government and the NGO sector provide overlapping formal and informal services and programs that are accessible to different populations living in informal settlements. This urban governance has an impact on food security because regular access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food is dependent on entitlements derived from secure access to income, housing, health, education, and credit (Frayne et al., 2010). Overlapping with government (national, local, and municipal) frameworks and services, NGOs operating in Kampala support refugee populations through a patchwork of supports linked to rights, information, legal protection, food provisions, vocational training, health care, credit, childcare, and education. Many of these NGOs target specific demographics that include refugees, such as youth or women, and others support refugees from specific countries of origin. Some collaboration exists among government and NGO actors, but despite official commitments to participatory practices, most planning was reported by both government and NGO participants in this study to be top-down. Few government or NGO policies, programs, or services specifically address or recognize food insecurity, but many are relevant to how the urban poor can consistently access safe, nutritious, and culturally relevant food in improved ways. A key recommendation of this study is that explicit recognition of urban food security needs would facilitate better coordination and targeting of related interventions.

Effective urban governance is hampered primarily by a lack of resources. Widespread and growing poverty means that there are multiple demands for scarce resources. Without exception, every academic-, government-, and NGO-affiliated participant involved in this research cited inadequate resourcing as the biggest barrier to responding effectively to refugee needs. This research study starts from an understanding that resource constraints are unlikely to change soon and that underfunding in refugee camps will continue to push refugees to Kampala, which also struggles to adequately provide essential services due to resource constraints.

The second most cited obstacle to effective government and NGO responses for refugee populations from research participants was a lack of usable data. Because refugees in Kampala are not eligible for any government support, they are largely indistinguishable from others in low-income urban settlements. Furthermore, many of Kampala's forced migrants and asylum seekers do not have identity documents and are not registered with any government office (Dawa, 2020). Policy stakeholders interviewed in this study indicated that while there are reasonably robust statistics on how many and what categories of migrants are in Kampala, there is scant accurate information on where they are, or how their needs differ from other urban residents. Furthermore, when data is available, it is quickly out of date due to the rapid urbanization underway.

One NGO, Slum Dwellers International (SDI), had plans to address this gap, in cooperation with Uganda's national government. In several informal settlements, SDI has coordinated with local communities on neighborhood slum profile mapping withs three sets of profiles in a growing number of Kampala's slums completed in 2003, 2011, and 2014 (SDI, 2022). Planned survey updates intend to collect data on country of origin as well as refugee status. At the time of this field research, however, leaders with SDI reported that the funding from the government to conduct this survey had been canceled during the COVID-19 pandemic, and there was no certainty if or when it would resume. Rather than relying on periodic surveys and enumerations by different organizations and researchers (IOM, 2017; AGORA, 2018; Mixed Migration Centre, 2022), regular surveys as part of a government census or with collaboration with NGO partners experienced with this kind of data collection would ensure accurate data was available to multiple governance stakeholders to determine needs and facilitate support. Partnering with NGOs would lower costs and offer scope to build on baseline data to both measure policy impact and recognize need. More efficient and widespread registration of refugees would also improve data.

In addition to insufficient resources and accurate usable data, respondents in this research identified the additional governance challenges of political responsibility, weak policy implementation, uneven and informal service delivery coverage, and ineffective mechanisms to support coordination among stakeholders. These points are elaborated with examples related to the regulatory environment for refugee settlement and rights and local urban governance, and COVID-19 policies.

Refugee settlement

When asylum seekers arrive in Uganda, they are required to register. Despite a set of procedures in place, there are years-long backlogs (UNHCR, 2022a; Reliefweb, 2024) and significant irregularities in the processes (Titeca, 2022, 2023). Registration falls under the jurisdiction of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), through the Department of Refugees. Refugees coming from some locations, including South Sudan, are awarded prima facie refugee status, which should speed up the recognition process. The time frame in the legal framework, both for initial registration and appeal, is short (two weeks), but has rarely if ever been met, and the pre-pandemic wait-times of up to two years are now becoming even longer as numbers of claimants rise, and administrators struggle with the backlog of new registrants and appeals (Ahimbisibwe and Belloni, 2024).

The high numbers of claimants are an important factor in the slow processing, but the procedures in place are also cumbersome. For those wishing to self-settle in Kampala, there is a two-step process: asylum registration followed by an application for refugee status. Prima facie recognized applicants must register at the border and are not permitted to start the process in Kampala. All applicants must start the process within 30 days of arrival in the country. As part of COVID-19 restrictions, the OPM temporarily closed its offices in Kampala and was not processing any new

registrations or issuing, renewing, or replacing expired or missing identification documents. The backlog that increased during this period has only grown since.

There are numerous reasons to explain the bottlenecks in the system and why many forced migrants never even start the registration process. These include: porous borders; onerous requirements at every stage of application and appeal; the necessity of renewing asylum certification every three months; difficultly accessing necessary interpreters; fear and lack of knowledge; the time and expertise needed to navigate the process over months and years; lack of necessary documentation; changes and uncertainties around which nationalities have prima facie recognition and where they can and cannot register; reliance on unscrupulous brokers taking advantage of refugees; and officials prioritizing and fast tracking applications for those who pay extra (Rebuild, 2022; Titeca 2022; NRC, 2024). NGO leaders interviewed for this study, who work directly with forced migrants in Kampala, claim that most international forced migrants never register. This leaves them vulnerable to arrest, adding to their barriers accessing employment and services and limiting data available to policymakers and NGOs that could be used to comprehend and support their needs more effectively. Five of the migrants interviewed for this study were unregistered. Reasons given were that they could not afford the registration process, they were afraid they would be denied refugee status and forced to leave because they had waited too long, and that they did not understand the process.

Because so many forced migrants are unregistered, the government, the international community, and NGOs do not have accurate data to fully recognize, plan for, or respond to needs. This also creates variability and unpredictability for migrants regarding whether they can access schools, health care, housing, and employment. This absence of documentation gets passed down to children and becomes an intergenerational burden and barrier to economic advancement. A migrant from the DRC interviewed for this study has no documentation, having fled the DRC as a child out of fear of being recruited as a soldier. His children are similarly undocumented. Arrests of undocumented migrants are frequent and fear of this restricts income-generation options, and in particular mobility, especially at night. This same migrant told me that "I never leaves my shack after dark, even if I have not yet eaten and am hungry." (Interview with Victor Juba on 23 May 2023, Namuwongo).

Many of the NGOs that operate in Kampala's settlements advocate for refugees' rights and try to address some of these registration-related challenges. For example, the United South Sudanese Refugee Committee, which operates in 10 different communities in Kampala, estimates there are more than 30,000 refugees from South Sudan in the city. They keep a roster of those they are in contact with, and when people on this list are detained by police, organization volunteers go to the police station to vouch for them. This organization and others, like the Refugee Law Project, also assist claimants with navigating the registration bureaucracy, including the appeals process.

An effective registration system would be one means to address the data gap impeding effective governance mechanisms to support vulnerable populations more effectively. Had this been in place during the COVID-19 lockdown, more migrants would have had access to food rations. While registration as a self-settled refugee does not entitle refugees to rights or benefits beyond what Ugandan nationals can access, it does facilitate greater accessibility to employment, education, health care, legal protection, and housing, all essential to food security.

Urban governance

The central government actors in the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area (GKMA) include the Ministry of Local Government, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD). Representatives from all of these entities participated in this research. The city's central area is managed by the KCCA, a national ministry. Within this area, there are five divisions, each with its own elected mayor and council. This research included interviews with forced migrants in Kisenyi II, part of the Kampala Central Division, and Namuwongo, in Makindye Division. Some informal settlements in the GKMA fall outside of KCCA jurisdictions and are administratively governed by elected local councils with oversight and direction from the Ministry of Local Government. Elected local councils are responsible for implementing much of the nationally determined policy for all residents of informal settlements in Kampala, which increasingly include growing populations of refugees.

The KCCA is involved in many of the services related directly to living conditions in settlements, including WASH and zoning. In areas governed by the Ministry of Local Government, there is a need to cooperate with the KCCA for waste removal, electricity, and other services, and these arrangements are not formalized (Richmond et al., 2018), resulting in variable and uneven service provision. There are also formal and informal governance coordination practices with NGOs and local government. NGO leaders surveyed and interviewed for this study all agreed that they were obligated to report on and seek permission for their community activities and that it was expected that city representatives be invited to public outreach events. Some described this relationship as one of government surveillance, with the need to constantly inform them about burdensome activities, whereas others found the relationship more of a partnership, welcoming local government support. The group stakeholder discussion at the research workshop indicated that local government participation styles varied considerably and were dependent on individual office holders rather than formally institutionalized practices.

There is also variation in the impact and trust local leaders have in their communities. This was evident in the two districts studied in this research. On the two days spent in Kisenyi II, there was a visible presence of community development outreach workers. The social worker present during migrant interviews there noted that KCCA outreach provided wellness checks on children and was well established

and effective. In contrast, Namuwongo residents interviewed reported they had little to no contact with KCCA or local council members and were unaware of any outreach services in place. Public hospitals are near both districts and accessed by settlement residents; these were strongly and positively associated with the KCCA. Migrants interviewed, several with serious medical conditions, all noted that they go to the hospital when necessary and that they are never asked to show documentation; consultations are provided for free to all. Treatment is more of a problem because hospitals rarely have drugs, even paracetamol, and filling prescriptions for medication is unaffordable. One unhoused migrant from Rwanda, a mother to a 3-month old, said she went to the hospital regularly and her daughter had been delivered there. Both she and her daughter were ill with tuberculosis and were HIV positive and when they were very ill, they went to the hospital "hoping for treatment." (Interview with Becky on 24 May 2023, Namuwongo). Some community NGOs can provide medical consultations and treatment to a very limited number of vulnerable community members, but most illnesses among poor settlement residents go untreated. This was one strong example of the direct impacts of under-resourced government services.

In different districts, there are also variations in how strictly restrictions around informal vending are enforced. As noted, the informal food sector is crucial for food security, providing low-barrier employment opportunities and affordable nutritious food. In most areas where traffic is not obstructed, informal food venders are active, despite official restrictions and goals of formalizing the sector. With 60% of Kampala's residents living in informal settlements, there is widespread understanding that informal retail is necessary for survival. For example, many NGOs offer microcredit and skills training to targeted groups, such as women, youth, and refugees, enabling upgrading or entry into informal-sector employment. Typically, funding for this comes from international donors. As NGOs regularly inform local government on their activities, there is tacit approval for enabling these strategies, even as sporadic enforcement of regulations by police keeps informal retailers vulnerable to harassment, fines, and having wares confiscated. The official urban plans to eliminate this sector, with sporadic and unpredictable restrictions on it, have a negative impact on urban food security for all low-income urban residents. Migrants with uncertain legal status are particularly at risk, as the implications of arrest are more severe.

Respondents in this research commented favorably on the ability of refugees to vote and to run for local office. In areas where there are large populations of South Sudanese or Somali migrants, refugees from these groups have been elected and are important advocates and support for their communities. Employment with the KCCA was also cited as highly desirable. One migrant interviewed has worked, without pay, for the KCCA for over a year as a street sweeper. Despite not being paid, she continued to do her job every morning and believed payments would resume "once the hardships of the pandemic had passed," despite it being more than a year since the lockdown.

Uganda's updated Local Government Development Planning Guidelines (RoU, 2020), refer to the importance of recognizing the needs of refugees and the role of local government in supporting the CRRF. This document draws attention to the influx of refugees but notes that local government lacks the resources and technical capacity to initiate appropriate actions. Guidelines advocate, instead, for a centrally-led and resourced integrative approach, whereby refugee populations are planned for, in line with planning for other vulnerable people, but to date, there are no resource allocations, nor timeline or targets associated with these goals. The KCCA similarly recognizes the urgency of planning for refugees as well as citizen populations, but it is also at a preliminary stage of policy development: there is awareness of the need to plan, take some steps toward consultation, but without concrete proposals of how to do so. In 2018, KCCA worked with several NGOs to identify refugee needs in Kampala, and the most pressing need identified was food (AGORA, 2018), but there has not been follow up to respond to these findings.

A lack of action, and of clarity around where urban planning responsibility, leadership, and resource control should lie, are sources of frustration for many government employees and for NGO actors who interact with them. One key example is the Uganda National Urban Plan (UNUP), due for renewal but stalled amid disagreement around which ministry should be tasked with taking the lead on updating it (raised in interviews with representatives from KCCA, MLHUD, and OPM). The now-expired 2017 UNUP had few of its recommendations implemented and did not include funding responsibility or timelines.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Uganda was partnering with SDI to identify priority areas in informal settlements and invest in targeted community-led upgrading efforts. SDI has also helped organize settlement residents, through their affiliate organization AcTogether and the formation of Urban Councils, to participate in upgrading projects and to advocate for tenancy rights. Many of the homes in both areas leak and are prone to flooding. One forced migrant interviewed had been evicted, and a neighbor allowed her two children to sleep in her house. However, during the day she and her two children stayed in an abandoned structure with a dirt floor and a partial roof, infested with fleas and mosquitoes. She had no furniture, not even a bed, mat, or cooking facilities, and her family was reliant on charity for food. For families such as these, local NGOs are essential for survival. After the COVID-19 outbreak, MLHUD issued a temporary moratorium on evictions. This was poorly enforced, however, and several of those interviewed for this study had been evicted during the pandemic and remained unhoused. Refugees are particularly vulnerable to evictions if they are not registered.

Water, sanitation, and hygiene are crucial for overall health and food security, and deficits here are widespread in Kampala's informal settlements. There have been major investments in water access over the past decade, and in both settlements visited for this study, water was readily available from nearby standpipes and all migrants interviewed stated they had no problems accessing water as needed. Settlement

residents did not have access to toilets, however, as limited paid units installed were rarely used due to their cost. The health risks in Namuwongo are particularly severe. The settlement runs between a railway line and the Nakivubo channel; this drainage channel serves as the main disposal area for human and other waste. Victor, a migrant from the DRC, has his shack next to the channel and reported that he and his family routinely dump their waste there, although he pays for the public toilets about once a week, adding, "If you don't eat much, that's as often as you need to go." (Interview with Victor Juba on 23 May 2023, Namuwongo).

There is considerable collaborative work already taking place among NGOs and with government actors in Uganda. Success collaborating with government is mixed. For example, one refugee-led organization interviewed has stopped attending participatory workshops they see as purely performative and a waste of donor money, which could instead be spent supporting grassroots initiatives rather than providing lunch for discussions that do not result in meaningful action. As one NGO leader remarked, "Why is it necessary to have a meeting at the Hilton? Why not come to our compound here, with some tents, and save some money … We need to meet, but not to just gather for good food. This money could change someone's life." (Interview on 19 May 2023 (name withheld)). Recurrent themes in interviews and survey data with both government actors and NGO leaders were that effective governance was hampered by unclear political jurisdiction and responsibility, weak policy implementation, uneven and informal service delivery coverage, and ineffective mechanisms for coordination and genuine partnership among stakeholders.

COVID-19 responses

Uganda had one of the world's most restrictive lockdown responses during the pandemic, and this accelerated and deepened poverty and food insecurity for the urban poor, and for refugees in particular (Ahmed et al., 2023). Uganda's government response was complicated by the 2020 national election, where opposition was centered in urban settlements. There was a mixed governance response of restrictions, at times enforced with violence, with some new measures to alleviate hardships also introduced. For example, KCCA temporarily suspended requirements for trading licenses for informal businesses, and the national government suspended tax collection. Steps taken over a two-year period included a 30-day night curfew from 7:00 p.m. to 5:30 a.m., suspension of some public transit (leading to increases in transit fares charged for remaining transit), the longest school closure in the world (22 months), restrictions on movement and public gatherings, and the closure of international borders (for 42 days in 2021).

In Kampala, food availability and food access were both affected negatively (Kasiime et al., 2021). Disrupted and blocked supply chains from rural and international production areas increased food shortages and spoilage, resulting in high consumer prices (Rauschendorfer and Spray, 2020). Restrictions on mobility and operating hours of markets were devastating for both income generation and

consumer access. The food retail sector was highly impacted by the lockdown, reducing food security for lower-income populations from two directions: income generation and direct food accessibility. The food retail sector has fewer barriers to entry than other employment options for newcomers, particularly for women (Metelerkamp, 2023). Refugees working with cross-border trade networks, most often connected to food, also lost their livelihoods due to COVID-19 border closures (Moyo et al., 2021). Compared to Ugandans, refugees were far more challenged to access food during the pandemic (Atamanov et al., 2021; Squarcina, 2023).

During the 61-day transit ban, which overlapped with the night curfew, fresh food vendors had to sleep in the marketplaces, something that is not an option for women with children. Many in the food industry lost employment with the closure of restaurants, cafés, bars, and hotels. While it is impossible to know what the impacts of a less restrictive response for public health would have been, emerging data shows that the aggressive lockdown restrictions had a negative impact on health, particularly for women and children (Musoke et al., 2023) as well as refugee populations. The UNHCR found that in February 2021, 64% of refugees were food insecure, compared with 9% of Ugandans (Atamanov et al., 2021). Refugees were less able to rely on friends and family, the most frequent coping response during the pandemic (Acayo, 2020) and were more reliant on government food packages.

Residents of urban settlements were especially vulnerable, as not only were risks of illness high, as social distancing and staying at home were not possible in overcrowded neighborhoods where food must be accessed daily, but policing of restrictions was often harsh, with confusion about the rules and fear of the risks. In informal settlements, the impacts of COVID-19 were experienced less as a health crisis and more in terms of its "devastating socioeconomic, political, and violent impacts" (Sverdlik et al., 2022: 4). Numerous media outlets as well as Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2021) reported on the rise of violence, mostly carried out by police but also vigilante groups. Gender-based violence also increased during this period (Bukuluki et al., 2023).

At the same time, during the pandemic lockdowns, when food prices and unemployment soared and many food retail locations were closed or open on very restricted schedules, steps were taken to provide food to vulnerable populations nationwide, including in Kampala. Food was distributed in informal settlements and in designated areas for registered refugee households. Although this food distribution has been widely criticized as politically motivated – especially during a presidential election year (Macdonald and Owor, 2020; Bukenya et al., 2022) – and poorly managed, it was necessary for the survival of many. One interview respondent stated she had better food security during the pandemic when these social protection measures were in place, because her business selling bananas had closed down and she was in too much debt to restart it. Other migrants interviewed were unable to access rations because they were unable to line up at the designated times or because they did not have cooking facilities for beans or posho, and thus were reliant on

purchasing prepared food. During the second set of COVID-19 restrictions, cash transfers were provided rather than food, which addressed some of these concerns, but distribution remained problematic and was widely seen as influenced by political favoritism and being diverted from those most in preference of politically connected households (Sverdlik et al., 2022).

Community-based organizations struggled with COVID-19 restrictions as well, because many of their programs were halted. All the NGOs that participated in this research had to suspend or severely curtail their activities. Those organizations who were able to continue operations during this time were crucial, especially those with capacity to provide some food to members. NGO leaders reported that they continued their activities without government authority, taking steps to conceal their operations. Some food delivery from NGOs supplemented that from the government, and by many accounts was better organized and more impactful for refugees and other vulnerable groups (Nathan and Benon, 2024).

CHALLENGES, GAPS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary barrier to effectively meeting the needs of refugees in Uganda is resources. International organizations, donors, and government actors are all struggling to meet commitments and goals, and the numbers of refugees have grown beyond the capacity of available resources. There are important gaps relating to which groups and which areas of need are supported, despite widespread awareness of the growing population of vulnerable and food insecure forced migrants in the city. While these gaps in part result from inadequate funds to support policy development and programming, there are spaces where responses could be improved, involving identifying vulnerable populations, recognition of urban food security as an area in need of urgent policy response, clearer political responsibility for policy implementation, measures to reduce corruption, and stronger stakeholder coordination and collaboration.

The current registration system is not effective. The OPM has the power to streamline this process, removing steps and bureaucracy and making it easier for asylum seekers to navigate. Many forced migrants settle in cities other than Kampala. They are already accessing health and education services; allowing them to register and self-settle in more areas would take some pressure off border reception areas and the Kampala office. Additional registration locations in informal settlements where asylum seekers live and work and have connections with local organizations could help move through the backlog of cases and appeals. The costs of this would be offset by the benefits of having better data on populations, which would help planning for all governance actors, including the global donor community. Decentralizing control of this, with fewer and clearer rules, might address some of the irregularities associated with corruption.

Understanding that urban food security is distinct from rural food production is gaining traction globally (Haysom and Battersby, 2023). Municipal governments are well situated to take the initiative on this policy area, and recognition of the

challenges urban populations face in accessing sufficient quantities of safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food would improve a range of policy interventions, including those related to slum upgrading, WASH, and regulating the informal sector. An easy and affordable outcome of a clear municipal food policy would be recognition of and support for informal food retail, eliminating the vulnerability food retailers currently experience.

In all of Uganda's recent guiding policy documents, there is clear attention to the growing refugee population. Similarly, many community-based organizations are creating programs and forms of support to include or target this group. The steps between understanding that there is a problem and setting specific goals and initiatives, with timelines and funding plans, still need to be taken. There must be clear political responsibility associated with targets. Stronger stakeholder coordination and collaboration – between ministries, levels of government, and with NGO partners – are needed to do this effectively. While some NGOs have rightly expressed frustration at the cost of meetings to allow for participatory input, this is a necessary process and is achievable if the OPM and KCCA were genuinely open to changing entrenched top-down practices.

CONCLUSION

Uganda's approach to refugee settlement is a model for extending rights and opportunities to forced migrants in ways that they recognize they may not be able to return to their homes and can contribute to Uganda, economically and culturally. Uganda's open borders have been crucial for the survival of thousands of people for decades and are rightly seen as a source of national pride. Under-resourcing and growing numbers are threatening this approach, and there are real risks it will be abandoned, borders will be closed, or that xenophobic sentiments will grow, resulting in the kinds of violence seen in some other African nations with large migrant populations.

Renewed support from the international community for this humanitarian crisis is desperately needed. However, there are governance actions that can be improved immediately. These include overhauling the registration system to make it more efficient and accessible, explicit attention to urban food security together with strategies to address it, and greater policy actor coordination, particularly connected to collaborative strategies to move beyond awareness of the crisis to setting specific targets and timelines.

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Migrant Remittances, Food Security, and Translocal Households in the Ghana-Qatar Migration Corridor

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of migrant remittances on household food security in the Ghana-Qatar migration corridor. Drawing on a 2023 survey of migrant-sending households in Ghana and in-depth qualitative interviews with migrants in Qatar, the study explores the characteristics, determinants, and patterns of remitting. The findings reveal that cash remittances play a crucial role in enhancing food security and the overall welfare of households in Ghana. However, the pressure to remit affects the food security of migrants in Qatar significantly, and they often adopt various coping strategies to manage their limited resources. The paper highlights the translocal nature of Ghanaian households, where remittances contribute to the cultural and economic sustenance of families. The study underscores the dual role of remittances in supporting household food security while imposing financial constraints on migrants and calls for policies that address the needs of both remitters and recipients.

Keywords: migrant workers, remittances, food security, translocality, Qatar, Ghana

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INTRODUCTION

The growing volume of international global remittances has led to a significant body of research examining their impact in the Global South (Adams, 2011; Connell and Brown, 2015; Azizi, 2021; Benhamou and Cassin, 2021; Feld, 2021). The literature generally emphasizes the positive impact of remittances on economic growth, education, housing, and healthcare. Remittances are also widely credited with improved livelihood opportunities and poverty reduction (Fonta et al., 2022). However, only recently has attention turned to the impact of international remittances on food security in low- and middle-income countries (Ebadi et al., 2018; Sulemana et al., 2018; Smith and Floro, 2021; Seydou, 2023).

The emerging case study suggests that there are several ways in which remittances potentially enhance the food and nutritional security of recipient households. As a major source of income for recipient households, remittances can increase their ability to pay for basic needs such as education, medical care, and food. Recent studies in Asia (Moniruzzaman, 2022), Central America (Mora-Rivera and Van Gameren, 2021), and Africa (Abadi et al., 2018) show that food purchase is an important use of remittances, and recipient households are relatively more food secure than non-recipient households. In Ghana, work on international and internal remittance impacts has consistently reported positive effects on household income, welfare, and food security (Quartey, 2006; Sam et al., 2013; Atuoye et al., 2017; Akpa, 2018; Sulemana et al., 2018; Adjei-Mantey et al., 2023). However, as Thow et al. (2016) observe, remittances can also be spent on unhealthy foods and contribute to the epidemic of overnutrition.

Remittances are a potential source of funds for investment in boosting agricultural production and productivity, enhancing the ability of rural households to grow more of their own food, and mitigating food insecurity (Regmi and Paudel, 2017; Xing, 2018; Dedewanou and Tossou, 2021; Szabo et al., 2022; Cau and Agadjanian, 2023). The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD, 2023) estimates that recipients either save or invest 25% of the money they receive, and that one-quarter of these savings (US$ 25 billion annually) go into agriculture-related investments. In the case of Ghana, Adams and Cuecuecha (2013) show that the bulk of remittances are spent on food, housing, and education. However, there is some case study evidence of agriculture-related investments. For example, Eghan and Adjasi (2023) show that the varied effects of remittances on agriculture depend on crop type and other economic activities of farming households.

Remittances also play an important food security-related role in mitigating sudden-onset and longer-duration economic, political, and environmental shocks (Couharde and Generoso, 2015; Bragg et al., 2017; Ajide and Alimi, 2019). Migrant remittances also tend to increase in volume in response to sudden shocks and in conflict settings (Le De et al., 2013; Bettin and Zazzaro, 2018; Rodima-Taylor, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, remittances were initially expected to decline precipitously, but many migrants "defied the odds" and increased their remitting

(Kpodar et al., 2023). The shock-absorbing mechanism (Ajide and Alimi, 2019) of increased remittances can play an important role in building resilience to food insecurity during recurrent or episodic crises and shocks (Obi et al., 2020; Gianelli and Canessa, 2021; Zingwe et al., 2023).

While there is a growing body of research on the impact of remittances on household food security, only a few have examined the impact of remitting on the food and nutritional security of remitters at their place of destination (Headley et al., 2008; Zezza et al., 2011; Choitani, 2017; Crush and Tawodzera, 2017; Osei-Kwasi et al., 2019). This paper expands on the existing literature that explores the complex relationship between migration and food security in Africa by presenting findings on the remitting practices of Ghanaian migrants working in the Gulf country of Qatar. It explores the links between migration, remittances, and food security by addressing the following questions: (a) What are the characteristics and motivations for remitting by Ghanaian migrants in Qatar? (b) How do recipient households use remittances, and do they improve the food security of those households? (c) Does the pressure or obligation to remit have negative food security consequences for migrants in Qatar? To answer these questions, the paper draws on data from two main sources: a 2023 survey of migrant-sending households in Ghana by the authors and in-depth interviews with Ghanaian migrants in Qatar. In the next section, we provide an overview of the emergence of Qatar as a destination for Ghanaian migrants, review the existing literature on this phenomenon, and discuss the conceptual framework for this study. The paper then presents the survey results on the receipt and use of remittances by migrant-sending households in Ghana, as well as their food security status. The final section discusses various themes relating to remitting and food security that emerged from the interviews in Qatar.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ghana's long history of post-independence international migration has unfolded over several overlapping phases. Immediately after independence – in particular during the 1960s and 1970s – a small number of professionals, primarily students, went abroad for educational purposes; they were joined by others who trained as civil servants (Peil, 1995; Anarfi et al., 2003). The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the migration of trained professionals, such as teachers, to other countries in Africa where their expertise and skills were highly valued. Within the West African sub-region, Nigeria became a popular destination for Ghanaians, especially during the oil boom. However, in 1983, Nigerian President Shagari signed an executive order deporting all West African migrants from the country. Over two million migrants were deported, including one million Ghanaians (Daly, 2023).

In the late 1980s and the 1990s, skilled and semi-skilled Ghanaians began to emigrate in larger numbers to destinations outside the continent, including North America and Western Europe (Asiedu, 2010; González-Ferrer et al., 2013; Arthur, 2016; Schans et al., 2018). Most migrated in response to the economic crises and

dislocation in Ghana that accompanied structural adjustment programs. These were implemented by the military government seeking to reverse economic decline and a massive balance of payments deficit (Konadu-Agyeman, 2000). The 1990s also saw the outmigration of migrants to new destinations such as Australia, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia (Obeng, 2019; Andall, 2021; Kandilige et al., 2024). Across all of these phases, the decline in economic opportunities, depressed living standards, and the quest for improved livelihoods triggered the emigration of migrants.

In the last two decades, the Gulf emerged as an important destination for lower-skilled male and female Ghanaians who took advantage of the voracious demand of the Gulf states for the importation of temporary migrant workers. On the supply side, the movement was driven by the high rate of unemployment, low remuneration, and heightened poverty that many Ghanaian households faced within the country (Atong et al., 2018). The movement of migrants to the Gulf was facilitated by a proliferation of brokers, recruiters, and work placement agencies who hire low-skilled and unskilled migrants as domestic workers, security guards, construction workers, and drivers for employers (Awumbila et al., 2019a; Deshingkar et al., 2019).

While data on migrant Ghanaians in the Gulf is scant, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar have become popular destinations for semi-skilled and unskilled male and female Ghanaian migrant workers (Atong et al., 2018; Awumbila et al., 2019; Rahman and Salisu, 2023). Recent studies show that about 75,000 Ghanaians are working in the Gulf, with an estimated 27,000 in Saudi Arabia, 24,000 in the UAE, 8,000 in Qatar, 4,500 in Bahrain, and 3,500 in Oman (Rahman and Salisu, 2023). However, these may be underestimates, given that not all migrants move through registered channels.

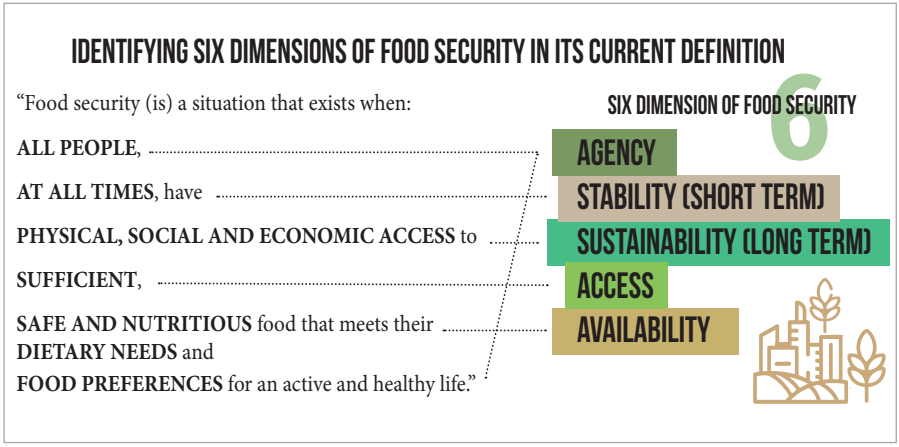
Several studies have revealed the poor working conditions and exploitative nature of the employment of temporary Ghanaian migrant workers in Qatar and elsewhere in the Gulf (Atong et al., 2018; Awumbila et al., 2019a; Kandilige et al., 2023). Others have documented the misrepresentation, abuse, harassment, and other difficulties that migrants face during their journey to and from workplaces in countries like Qatar (Apekey et al., 2018; Awumbila et al., 2019; Deshingkar et al., 2019). Additional studies have focused on the migration industry, the role of brokers and recruiters, and the reintegration experiences of returning migrants (Awumbila et al., 2019b; Rahman and Salisu, 2023). However, insufficient research attention has been paid to remitting practices in the Qatar–Ghana migration corridor and the impacts of remittances on the food security of translocal households in Ghana and Qatar.

Interactions between migrants and households in their countries or regions of origin have been variously conceptualized as "multi-spatial" (Foeken and Owuor, 2001), "stretched" (Porter et al., 2018), "multi-locational" (Schmidt-Kallert and Franke, 2012; Andersson Djurfeldt, 2015; Ramisch, 2016), and "translocal" (Greiner, 2011). Following Porter et al. (2018), Steinbrink and Niedenführ (2020), and Andersson-Djurfeldt (2021), we suggest that the concept of translocality is a useful starting point for framing the material and other connections between Ghanaian

migrants in Qatar and households in Ghana. Steinbrink and Niedenführ (2020) see translocal households as collective social and economic units whose members do not live in one place but effectively coordinate their reproduction, consumption, and resource usage activities. Greiner (2011: 610) describes translocalism as "the emergence of multidirectional and overlapping networks created by migration that facilitate the circulation of resources, practices and ideas and thereby transforming the particular localities they connect." Migration of household members results in household networks, multiple sources of family income, and increased exchange of goods, information, and ideas between the origin and destination localities (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2015). Connectivity within translocal households is a fundamental survival strategy that contributes to sustainable livelihoods and food security for families at home. There is a mutual benefit through remittances and food transfers in a bi-directional relationship. While this concept of translocality in Africa has largely been applied to internal migration and livelihood strategies, international migration has similar dynamics when it comes to the food security of translocal households tied together by remittances (Crush and Caesar, 2018).

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2006) defines food security as when "all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." Food security has six basic pillars: availability, accessibility, utilization, stability, agency, and sustainability (see Figure 1) (HLPE, 2020). This study focuses primarily on the accessibility and utilization dimensions of food security in Ghana and Qatar. The in-depth interviews in Qatar also provide insights into the agency exercised by migrants in making choices about remittances and food consumption, and the constraints on that agency.

Figure 1: Conceptualizing food security



Source: SIHMA elaboration from HLPE (2020: 10)

METHODOLOGY

The research team collected data for this study in Ghana and Qatar from March to June 2023 using a mixed methodology. In the first phase of the research, we administered a household survey to a sample of households with migrants currently living and working in Qatar. There is limited information about the location of these households and no sampling frame from which to derive a probabilistic sample. Migrants in Qatar come from all over Ghana, but for logistical and cost reasons, sampling was concentrated in Accra and Kasoa, where, anecdotally, there were believed to be sizable numbers of migrant-sending households. The research team recruited participants through migrant networks, contacts at recruitment agencies, and the Ghana Immigration Service. In the time available, this non-probabilistic sampling method yielded 200 completed interviews. The survey collected data on the socio-economic characteristics of the household, factors influencing the decision to send migrants to Qatar, incomes and expenditure, remittance receipt and use, and household food security. The team collected the survey data on tablets using *ODK Collect* – an Android app for managing and filling out forms – and stored it in the *Kobo Toolbox* online. These data were downloaded for analysis after the surveys were concluded.

The study used the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) to assess the access dimension of food security in relation to the quality and quantity of food in the household and the dimension of worry and anxiety about food access and supply (Coates et al., 2007). The researchers generated a score for each household on a scale from 0 (most secure) to 27 (most insecure). Based on the HFIAS scores, they used the Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence (HFIAP) to assign each household to one of four categories: food secure, mildly food insecure, moderately food insecure, and severely food insecure.

To capture food utilization, the researchers used the Household Dietary Diversity Scale (HDDS), which measures how many food groups were consumed in the household in the previous 24 hours and generates a score between 0 and 12 for each. Households were then categorized as having high (from 6 to12), medium (from 4 to 5) or low (from 0 to 3) dietary diversity (Baliwati et al., 2015). In addition to calculating the different food security metrics for households in Ghana, the research team compiled aggregated statistical tables with a focus on household characteristics, income sources, and use of remittances. Given the non-probabilistic sample, we focused on building a descriptive statistical profile of the sample of 200 migrant-sending and remittance-receiving households.

In the second phase of the research, the team conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with Ghanaian migrants working in Doha and surrounding communities in Qatar. We identified 58 participants, using the purposive snowball sampling method with the assistance of a local gatekeeper. The initial participants were recruited through community networks such as the Ghanaian Association in Qatar and churches. The team arranged interviews at workforce camps, other accommodation facilities, and Ghanaian restaurants. These semi-structured interviews focused

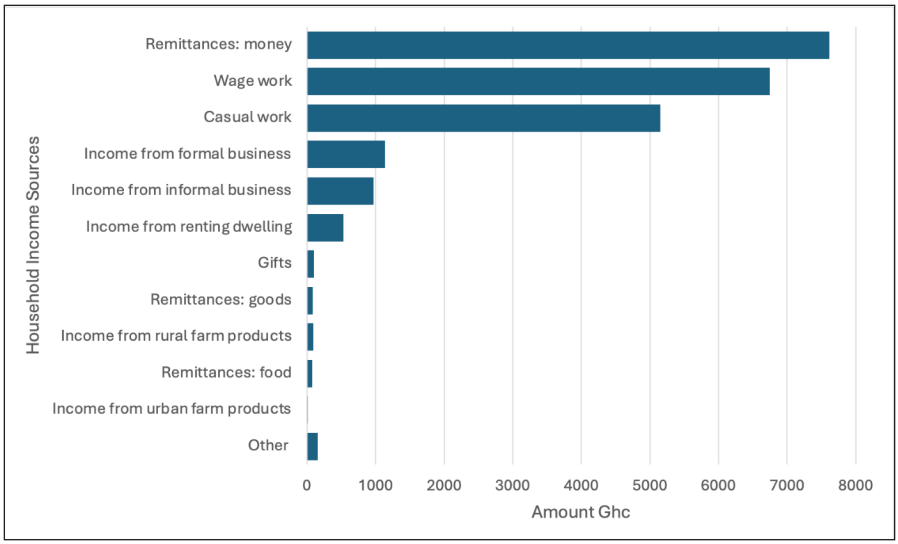
on a range of issues, including migration histories, employment and the nature of work, remittance motivations and practices, as well as food availability, access, and utilization experiences. For the analysis of the interviews, the researchers used thematic analysis to identify common patterns and describe and interpret the study data collected (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To identify common themes, we analyzed and coded transcripts of interviews, using *Nvivo* 12 software.

The study limitations include, first, that the findings in Ghana and Qatar are not directly comparable given the different methodologies used in each site. As a result, the Ghana survey provides more accurate statistical indicators of remittance usage and food security status, while the Qatar survey provides rich personal insights into the subjective food security experiences and remitting of migrants. Second, the migrants interviewed in Qatar were not necessarily from the same households as those surveyed in Ghana. Tracing those migrants would have been a breach of confidentiality and anonymity and would have been extremely challenging in the short time available for research in Qatar. Hence, only broad conclusions, rather than direct causal connections, can be drawn about translocality. Third, these were hard-to-reach populations in both sites, and random sampling was impossible. Both phases relied on non-probabilistic snowball sampling to identify respondents. As a result, the findings are indicative rather than representative and generalizable.

SURVEY RESULTS

As many as 80% of the respondent households in Ghana had received cash remittances from their migrant members in Qatar in the previous year. Remittances were the most important source of household income overall, exceeding wage and casual work, as well as income from running a business (see Figure 2). The amounts sent to the household in Ghana varied considerably, with 34% receiving an average of Ghc 1,500 (USD 91) per month and 44% receiving more than Ghc 2,500 (USD 153) per month. However, only 11% of the households received remittances more than once a month and another one-third monthly. The rest received remittances only a few times in the year.

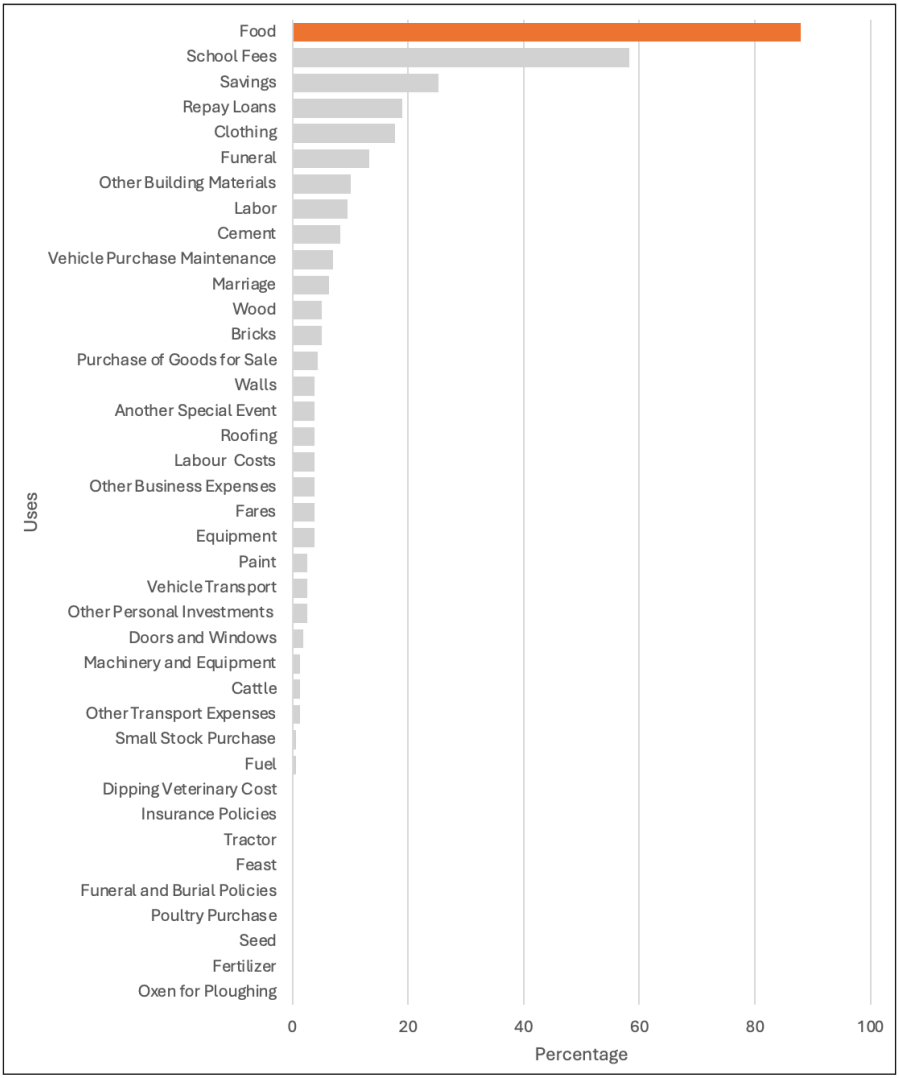
Figure 2: Sources of household income



Source: Authors' own work

Remittances had a marked impact on these migrant-sending households in Ghana. As many as 73% of the respondents indicated that remittances were "very important" to their household, and another 18% said that they were "important." These findings are consistent with studies that have examined the role of remittances in improving household food security in the Northern and Upper-East regions of Ghana (Karamba et al., 2011; Kuuire et al., 2013; Sulemana et al., 2018; Akobeng, 2022; Apatinga et al., 2022; Baako-Amponsah et al., 2024). Remittances are used for a wide variety of household expenses, mostly basic needs. The most common use was food purchase (see Figure 3), with almost 90% of remittance-receiving households using the funds to buy food. Other important uses included investment in children's education (at 58%), and financial transactions in the form of savings (25%) and repaying loans (19%). Yet other uses included buying clothing (18%), funeral expenses (13%), and paying for a variety of construction materials such as cement, wood, bricks, and paint. None of the respondents invested remittances in improving rural agriculture, although a handful did purchase cattle with remittances. The findings about the priority given to remittance expenditure on food purchases are consistent with those of studies in other parts of Africa (see, for example, Pendleton et al., 2014; Crush and Caesar, 2017, 2018).

Figure 3: Use of remittances



Source: Authors' own work

On the HFIAP indicator, only 1% of the households were classified as severely food insecure. On the other hand, just 17% of the households were completely food secure (see Table 1). Over half (54%) were only mildly food insecure. These results suggest that food insecurity is still a challenge among this group of remittance-receiving Ghanaian households but would be much more severe without the transfer of remittances from Qatar. The HDDS analysis shows that household dietary diversity

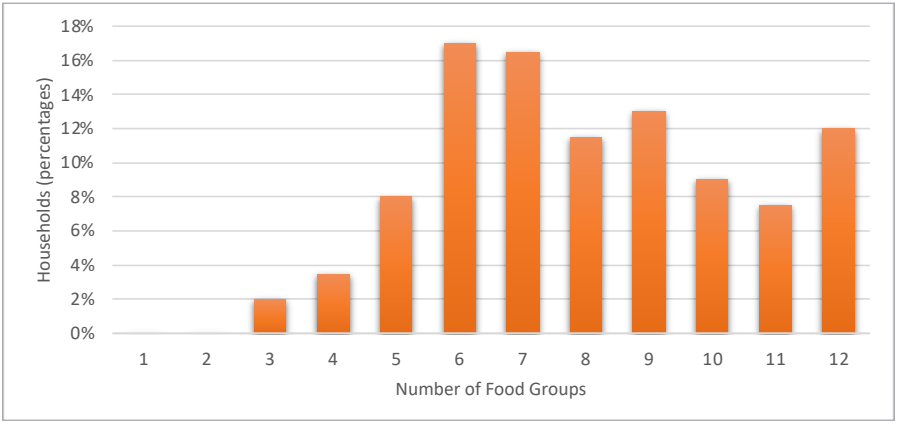
was relatively high, with a mean of 8 out of a possible 12, indicating that, on average, the household consumed food from approximately eight different groups in the previous 24 hours. Approximately 47% had a dietary diversity score of 7 or less, and 53% had an HDDS above 7 (see Figure 4).

Table 1: Prevalence of household food insecurity

Food Security Category	Frequency	Percentage
Food secure	32	16.5%
Mildly food insecure	105	54.1%
Moderately food insecure	55	28.4%
Severely food insecure	2	1.0%
Total	**194**	**100.0%**

Source: Authors' own work

Figure 4: Dietary diversity of households



Source: Authors' own work

INTERVIEW RESULTS

This section focuses on the results of the Nvivo thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, concentrating on four key themes: translocality, remitting capacity, rationale for remitting, and remittances and food security. On the first theme, many of the Ghanaian migrants interviewed were clearly embedded in translocal households with nodes in Ghana and Qatar. For example, one migrant described the principle of reciprocity within their translocal household in this way:

> I believe it's necessary to share my success with my family, no matter how small it may be. Back in Ghana, when I needed help, they supported me, so it's only

> fair to reciprocate and support them now. I don't get worried when I send them money because I always budget for things I need here and the rest for my family back home, which they can share among themselves. (Interview No. 29, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

Another mentioned his obligation for the family's survival in Ghana, seeing himself as the family 'breadwinner' and provider:

> I send money every month to my wife and child. Monthly, I send 800 Ghs and support my siblings when they are needed. I am the man, the breadwinner, and the father. They cannot survive without me. Besides, it is my responsibility to provide for them as the man and father of the house. The money is used for household food purchases. (Interview No. 8, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

A third described how he coordinates his remitting to Ghana with family members in Italy, suggesting that some migrants in Qatar are members of more complex multilocal households with nodes in Ghana, Qatar, and elsewhere:

> My other siblings in Italy help the family when one of us is lacking, especially during festive seasons; since we are Muslims, we send them money. My siblings also support the family when one of us is facing difficulties. Currently, I don't have any job, so any money I sent home will push me into a food crisis. I didn't have this problem previously when I was working. (Interview No. 28, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

On the second thematic issue of remitting capacity, the interviews provided insights into the remitting priorities of migrants in Qatar. A number addressed the question of why they were not always able to send large amounts home or were unable to remit on a consistent and regular basis. The frequency of remitting was clearly affected by their precarious economic status in Qatar, including the availability of jobs and the constant reality of job loss:

> I try to remit [to] the family regularly, even though there are times when I cannot do so due to financial constraints, just like last month's ending. I pleaded with them that they will hear from me when things go well. (Interview No. 29, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

In the lead-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, there were numerous job opportunities in the construction industry. Many migrant workers left the companies who had recruited them in Ghana to become what they call "freelancers" who work in construction or other higher-earning sectors. However, after the World Cup, employment layoffs left many Ghanaian "freelancers" stranded and unemployed,

with their savings spent on food and accommodation. They had very little money with which to support the household in Ghana. For example:

> It has been seven months since I sent money to my family, but I explained to them that things have been difficult, and they understood my situation. The first 14 months in this country was peaceful and different. There was a lot of construction jobs available due to the 2022 World Cup. I survived, I had something to depend on and could consistently send [money] every month to the family, but this whole mess started when I moved from the company to freelance before the World Cup. Life has been complicated after the World Cup. A lot of jobs have shut down. (Interview No. 17, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

> My earnings in Qatar have been minimal after the World Cup. I haven't been able to send enough money home to benefit the family for some time now. I could not even repay all the loans I took to come to Qatar. The land I used as collateral was seized and sold. I feel so disappointed in myself. I focused on getting my ID, so I didn't spend much on food. I hope they will pay me for the two weeks of work arrears, which should be 1,400 Riyals or half of it so that I can use that to survive. (Interview No. 34, Qatar, 9 June 2023).

> I am unemployed; I don't send money home and manage what I have for my stay. But previously, I used to remit every month whenever I was paid my basic salary. Why should I send money to someone when I am unemployed and unsettled? They know how generous I am, but they would have to pardon me for now. (Interview No. 27, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

The interviews with the migrants in Qatar also provided insights into the reasons for sending remittances back to Ghana. Remitting to pay school fees and educational support was a major theme in many interviews and is consistent with Gyimah-Brempong and Asiedu's (2015) study on remittances and education in Ghana, which found a strong link between remittances and the formation of human capital. They note that international remittances significantly increase the probability that families will invest in the primary and high school education of children in Ghana. As one migrant confirmed:

> I send money every month to my family, about 1,500 Cedis, to support their education. If it means sending the last amount of money on me, I will do whatever it takes to give them a better education and dreams. My kids and wife are why I am working, and I must take good care of them. I even have this education I am talking about well-planned out as well. I have learned that Ghana's educational system doesn't meet the desired standards, especially at the university level. I plan to enroll my children in vocational training after

> they complete junior high school, like being a mechanic, mason, fixing air conditioners, etc., which would make them better than their mates. (Interview No. 30, Qatar, 8 June 2023).

Another respondent noted that the school fees of his younger sibling are non-negotiable, regardless of his situation:

> I send money to my mom for upkeep and to care for my little brother, who is still in senior high school. I am not financially stable; I sometimes struggle to eat, especially when sending money. I still have to think about my family's well-being, especially that of my little brother, who is still in school. It would go a long way to prevent him from indulging in certain practices to get money when he is not getting enough at home. (Interview No. 26, Qatar, June 6, 2023).

Additionally, most migrants in Qatar confirmed that food security features largely in their reasons for remitting to translocal household members in Ghana. For example:

> I send money to the family in Ghana every month. I send 900 Cedis purposely for their food. They use the money to buy foodstuffs, including rice, beans, yam, chicken, etc. Rice is the most essential food in my household because of my kids. They like rice a lot. I want to give them a good life; it is my responsibility, and I fully embrace it. (Interview No. 5, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

> I ask my mother what they need at home at the end of every month. I tell my aunt, who owns a "provision shop" (mini grocery shop), to make the list of items such as Milo, soups, cereals, soaps, rice, oil, Cowbell coffee, and tomato pastes and package them and give them to my mother. So, she might package groceries of about Ghc 300; then I will send her 800 Ghc, and she takes her money and gives the rest to my parents. I give them about 500 Ghc to my mother for their monthly upkeep and my son's feeding fee. My child's feeding fee is about 15 Ghc a day plus her lunch of about 5 Ghc. (Interview No. 1, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

In some cases, remittances for food purchase supplement household income from other sources:

> My mother is not working, but my dad is a commercial driver, so sometimes he supports the family every month, too. He adds to the money and uses it to buy foodstuffs such as plantain, cassava, rice, vegetables, including garden eggs and other items on his way home after work. (Interview No. 3, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

A single mother noted that the food security of her family in Ghana had improved since she migrated to Qatar:

> Life has been difficult, but things have improved since I came to Qatar. I am able to send some little money to my family, which has, to some extent, paid their rent and supported household food purchases and consumptions and the family in general, though the salary is not much … all the money goes to essential household expenditures, such as sending money to feed my kids and paying the rent for them whenever it is due. (Interview No. 1, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

Another respondent noted a similar improvement in his ability to provide food for the family in Ghana since migrating to Qatar:

> At least, I have been earning some money to support and provide food for my wife and kids and even started a project, something I wasn't able to do while in Ghana. (Interview No. 5, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

The capacity of migrants to remit on a regular basis is clearly key to sustainable household food security over time. If there are any delays or irregularities, the household must adjust its food consumption accordingly:

> I am able to send money back home to Ghana once a month, but it sometimes delays when I am not paid. In that case, they have to adjust and find alternate ways to feed [people] at home until I am able to remit to them when I am paid. (Interview No. 54, Qatar, 17 June 2023).

An additional use of remittances with longer-term food security implications is the investment of remittance income in small income-generating businesses in Ghana. Respondents stressed that these small businesses generate income for the household to manage the food situation at times when they have not been able to remit:

> I regularly send money to my mom and girlfriend in Ghana at the end of every month for her food. Also, I helped my mom reopen her collapsed bar to provide her with a source of income and food. You know, the job here is erratic, especially when you are on a free visa. Besides, you can be sacked at any time. I carefully manage how I send money to ensure that I save and support my family without leaving myself stranded here. (Interview No. 49, Qatar, 15 June 2023).

Some respondents noted that helping the household set up a small business relieved them of the pressure of caring for their children and extended family members. As one noted:

> I don't send money to my family often. This is because my sister has her own business, which I helped to set up. She benefits and gets her income for food from the returns, so I don't have to work to support household food consumption – helping her monthly as well as my son would put a huge burden on me. Instead, I send my son 300 Riyals (Ghc 900) monthly. Sometimes, when I don't remit, my sister supports my son too, because she has the business. She takes money from me for food purchases and other household needs until I can remit to them. (Interview No. 22, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

Finally, there is the question of whether remitting to Ghana impinges in any way on the food security of remitters in Qatar. Other studies have suggested that remitting can affect their own food security negatively, forcing them to adopt various coping strategies (Crush and Tawodzera, 2017). Some respondents said they were able to remit by adjusting their own consumption, eating simply and cheaply in cafeterias and Ghanaian restaurants. For example:

> Sending them money doesn't affect me here because I plan to keep some 100 Riyals on me for a month, which I use for basic expenses here. Still, even with that, I don't use all the 100 Riyals. I sometimes spend only 50 Riyals in a month. After all, I don't spend much here because I don't buy any clothing, and with food, I rarely make orders. I just go to the restaurant and eat at the work cafeteria, even though I don't like it at times (Interview No. 48, Qatar, 14 June 2023).

More common were descriptions by migrants of depriving themselves of food to save money to remit:

> When I send the money home to my son and siblings, it also impacts me here, but I can't complain; if I don't do it, who will? I have to manage. It's not like they are using the money to do anything for me, but for their consumption. If I want to eat what I want, I might need 500 Riyals every month; but with my responsibilities, it is impossible. I must eat smaller and the same meals all the time. (Interview No. 4, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

> My family is always appreciative of the little financial support. I send them regularly every month when I am paid, which makes me happy. Sometimes, sending money home puts me in a difficult situation here, especially when we are not paid early. I sometimes take foodstuffs such as rice from my friends and pay for or replace it when I am paid. (Interview No. 51, Qatar, 15 June 2023).

A single mother with three younger siblings explained that she had an enormous responsibility to her family in Ghana, so she kept only 10% of her basic monthly salary for her own monotonous diet:

> Remitting money to my family in Ghana sometimes impacts what I eat. I don't send all the money: sometimes, I leave about 150 qa (from my basic salary of 1,500) on me for upkeep and food, which is not enough, but I "manage" it all the time. I am eating the same kind of food all the time. For instance, I eat one way: rice with no variety all the time because I want to manage the money. (Interview No. 1, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

A male respondent in his late twenties said that he ate beans all the time to cope with the financial pressure and burden that comes with assisting members of the translocal family:

> Sending money impacted what I ate. Honestly, it was beans and gari that I usually like to eat because, per my calculation, it would have been difficult and lost for me to eat other foods. Someone owed me, so I relied on that to purchase food. (Interview No. 16, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

To cut down on living costs in Qatar and free up funds in order to remit, many migrants share the same rented housing space and kitchen with a degree of community living and solidarity. Shared cooking also cuts down the cost of food. Although some Ghanaian migrants work for companies where food is provided, they prefer to join their colleagues to cook and eat as a group:

> In difficult times here in Qatar, my brothers in this room often help me. Even when we were all in the company and were provided food, we didn't like it because it was difficult to eat and hence, though not allowed in the company building, we still prepared food as a group and eat. Every member in the room contributed money that we used to buy foodstuff to prepare the meals. (Interview No. 28, Qatar, 7 June 2023).

CONCLUSION

Most studies of the relationship between migration and remittances focus on migrants who remit or households that receive. This study breaks with tradition by focusing on both ends of the Ghana–Qatar remittance corridor. In this paper, we juxtapose the results of a sample survey of remittance recipient households in Ghana with the observations of Ghanaian migrants working in Qatar about their remitting motivations, practices, and challenges. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data in the two sites provides new insights into the importance of

remittance receipts for migrant-sending households in Ghana and complementarity insights into the remitting patterns of Ghanaian migrants in Qatar.

Peth (2018, blog) argues that "translocality is a variety of enduring, open, and non-linear processes, which produce close interrelations between different places and people. These interrelations and various forms of exchange are created through migration flows and networks that are constantly questioned and reworked." The priorities of remittance senders and the perspectives of remittance recipients indicate that this definition of translocality provides an appropriate conceptual framing for understanding the intimate material and emotive connections between migrants in Qatar and households in Ghana enabled by migrant remittances. At this stage, given the non-probabilistic nature of the sample in the two locations and the fact that the migrants interviewed are not necessarily from the same households as those surveyed, direct translocal linkages are indicative rather than definitive for future research on this migration and remittance corridor.

In the introduction, we posed several questions about this relationship: first, how do recipient households use remittances, and do they improve the food security of those households? Second, does the pressure or obligation to remit have negative food security consequences for migrants? Based on the data collected, these questions can be answered in the affirmative. Food purchase is a major use of remittances by the surveyed households in Ghana, and this infusion of income from outside the country significantly enhances levels of food security and dietary diversity. However, migrant cash remittances not only alleviate household food insecurity but improve household welfare through food purchases, payment of children's school fees, and enabling start-up business opportunities. In Qatar, if migrants are employed and earning income, they can balance the obligation to remit with their own food consumption needs. However, unemployment and income loss affect their ability to remit and their own food security situation negatively. As one translocal migrant observed: "I could have enjoyed much better food and lived comfortably, if it was all about me." (Interview No. 1, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

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Changing Diets, Varying Food Consumption Patterns, and Food Security among Recent Zimbabwean Migrants in Windhoek, Namibia

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Abstract

In Zimbabwe, decades of economic and political challenges have generated significant out-migration to neighboring countries including Namibia, perceived by many Zimbabweans as being more politically and economically stable than their home country. While numerous studies have documented these movements, few have interrogated the food security of migrants in host countries, where they are likely to face food security challenges. This study thus sought to investigate the changing dietary and food consumption patterns of recent Zimbabwean migrants in Namibia and the impact on household food security. The researcher collected data from 35 Zimbabwean migrant households in Windhoek through in-depth interviews. Study results show that deteriorating economic conditions and food insecurity were the major drivers of migration from Zimbabwe. The pre-migration diet of most migrants was mixed, consisting of both traditional and Westernized foods. The major food security challenges were: non-availability of foods that migrants consumed while still in Zimbabwe; poor quality of some substitute foods; increased food expenses through importing foods from the home country; and shortage of time to prepare some foods. While most migrant households reported improved household food security compared to the pre-migration period, numerous food challenges remained. Many worried that the changing diet and the consequent increase in the consumption of over-processed foods could have negative health outcomes, hence impacting on their food security as well.

Keywords: migration, poverty, food security, dietary changes, food consumption patterns

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INTRODUCTION

International migration is a global phenomenon. In 2023, approximately 184 million people were living outside their country of nationality globally (World Bank, 2023). While migration happens in all parts of the world, much of the international migration literature disproportionately focuses on the movement of people from the Global South to the Global North (Freier and Holloway, 2019). However, as Leal and Harder (2021) point out, close to a third of global international migration occurs between countries in the Global South. In Africa, people move between countries due to socio-economic disparities, political conflicts, governance issues, and environmental challenges (Fofack and Akendung, 2024). In Zimbabwe, large-scale out-migrations have been fueled by deteriorating economic conditions arising out of political disagreements in successive elections post-2000. For a brief period, from 2009 to 2013, the inauguration of a Government of National Unity (GNU) temporarily stabilized the economy and bought the country a period of relative political stability, slowing down emigration from the country. However, that relative stability did not last, as subsequent elections were heavily disputed. A coup d'état in 2017 also engendered political and economic uncertainty and increased emigration. While many Zimbabwean migrants settled in South Africa (Crush et al., 2012), some moved to other countries within the region and even to Europe and North America. Many also settled in Namibia, being drawn there by the country's relative political stability and economic viability (Kiwanuka and Monson, 2009).

The migration flows from Zimbabwe have been mixed in that they consist of refugees, asylum seekers, as well as migrants of different ages, genders, and other dynamics, such as people emigrating in response to governance and economic issues (Crisp and Kiragu, 2010; Crush et al., 2012). Zimbabweans of different socio-economic backgrounds are forced to migrate in search of better livelihoods. Arriving in a foreign country like Namibia without jobs and other means of stable livelihoods, most of the migrants are vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, hunger, and food insecurity. Questions of food security in the migration discourse thus become important. The centrality of food security in the migration discourse is a result of the fact that international migration and food security are intimately linked (ActionAid, 2017). On the one hand, food insecurity can be viewed as a trigger for migration where household members migrate as a coping strategy (Crush and Caesar, 2017; Carney and Krause, 2020). On the other hand, food insecurity may be a result of migration (ICMPD, 2022) where migrants may be disproportionately affected by food insecurity as the result of their migrant status. There is also a proliferation of literature that deals with the impact of migration on the food security of households in the migrants' areas of origin (Crush and Tawodzera, 2023). This literature largely lauds the positive role of remittances in shoring up household food security.

What is lacking, however, are studies that interrogate the food security of migrants in their host countries, particularly in the Global South, where South-South international migrations receive less attention. The few studies in this regard are only

of an exploratory nature. In a study carried out in South Africa, Crush and Tawodzera (2016) indicate the vulnerability of Zimbabwean migrants to food insecurity due to precarious employment and low incomes. More recently, Ramachandran et al. (2024) examined the food security of female Zimbabwean migrant households in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic and found the majority of these households living with food security precarity that was worsened by the pandemic.

In the same vein, Orolunrana and Odii (2024) found that migrants' food security was affected by low earnings, xenophobia, and reduced access to their preferred foods. They note that more studies are needed to capture migrants' experiences regarding food insecurity. This is particularly important, given the observations by Osei-Kwasi et al. (2022) that migrants largely live in environments where the foods they were accustomed to consuming back home are not easily accessible or available, forcing them to shift to other less-suitable substitutes. Achieving Zero Hunger, as envisaged in the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2, therefore requires an in-depth understanding of dietary changes of vulnerable migrants.

Given the above context and the identified knowledge gaps, the study sought to investigate the modifications to dietary and food-consumption patterns of recent Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek, Namibia and the impacts of these changes on their household food security. The research had three main objectives: (a) to establish the common foods consumed by the migrants prior to leaving their country; (b) to ascertain the current diets and consumption patterns and determine the causes for the changes; and (c) to assess the impact of the changing diets and consumption patterns on the food security status of the urban migrant households. The next section discusses the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Unlike South-South migrations, there are many studies on South-North migrations and food security. Ahmed et al. (2023), for example, carried out a scoping review on articles on the food security of international migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic years (2020–2022). Of the 46 papers reviewed, only six where about Africa, while the majority were about South-North migrations in the United States of America (USA) and Canada, focusing on migrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This highlights the predominant focus of international migration and food security studies on South-North movements.

In the Global North, many of the studies on international migration and food security have been carried out within the healthy-immigrant framework. This framework can be traced to the work of Markides and Coreil (1986) who noted that Mexican immigrants in the USA exhibited better health outcomes than African Americans. They concluded that there was a foreign-born advantage, wherein immigrants arrive with certain advantages that local poor populations may not have. Other studies focusing on low-income Mexican migrants in the USA have also reported the presence of this healthy immigrant (Markides and Eschbach, 2005),

also indicating better health outcomes among the non-native-born arrivals. These advantages are largely attributed to the selective nature of migration where healthier and better-resourced migrants are motivated to move than less-healthy and poorly resourced ones (Taylor et al., 1999; Singh and Siahpush, 2001). Hence, during the initial period of arrival, migrants exhibit better health and food security outcomes than the low-income local population, owing to their background factors. Such advantages, however, are predicted to decline with time, such that the health and food security outcomes of the migrants would eventually mirror those of the local population (Teitler et al., 2017).

But why would the health and food security outcomes of the migrants ultimately decline? First, the decline may occur due to acculturation (Vu et al., 2020). As immigrants adapt to their new environment, they often adopt new dietary practices, leading to a nutrition transition from traditional diets to highly processed foods, potentially decreasing their health and food security outcomes (Vu et al., 2020). Second, dietary changes may also occur due to the inability of migrants to access foods that are culturally appropriate (Carney and Krause, 2020). Third, the food environment in the host country may be fundamentally different to that of the immigrants' country of origin, affecting the availability of healthy foods (Osei-Kwasi et al., 2022). This is important, as immigrants may settle in areas considered food deserts or food swamps (Berggreen-Clausen, 2022). Fourth, immigrants may face economic integration challenges, including unemployment and low-income levels and this will limit their access to healthy foods, consequently impacting negatively on their food security (Aguilera and Massey, 2003). Fifth, immigrants may lack social support and networks that are critical to providing information and resources necessary to maintaining food security (Karnik and Peterson, 2023). Migrants will therefore likely face health and food security challenges the longer they stay in their host country.

Several authors have questioned the validity of the healthy-immigrant paradox hypothesis. John et al. (2012) argue that the empirical testing of hypothesis rarely yields consistent results. Hadley et al. (2007) studied the food security of West African refugees in the USA and found that refugees who had been in that country for less than one year were twice more likely to be food insecure than those that had been in the country for at least three years. The conclusion that one can draw from such studies seem to be that a longer duration in the host country tends to protect against food insecurity, in opposition to the premise of the healthy-immigrant paradox hypothesis. In a scoping review of low- and middle-income country immigrants in high-income countries, Berggreen-Clausen (2022) suggests that newly arriving immigrants are likely to display worse outcomes because of challenges they face in accessing fresh foods, traditional foods, and healthier foods as well as other challenges related to low incomes and lack of social support structures.

While there is much discourse on South-North migration and food security, very little is known about South-South migrations and the food security of recent

migrants in their host countries. Not much is known regarding how migrants adapt to the changing food environments, how they access food, the challenges they face, and changes they have to make to adapt to a new environment. The need for a study that explores the changing dietary and food consumption patterns of recent migrants and the impacts of these changes on household food security is therefore self-evident.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section details the methods used to collect data from Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek, Namibia to fulfill the study objectives. The researcher collected data for the study over a two-week period in November and December 2022.

The study areas: Havana, Soweto, One-Nation, and Okuryangava

The study was carried out in the Greater Katutura area, a low-income residential area in the City of Windhoek. Katutura incorporates some of the largest informal settlements in the city. The fact that Katutura is a low-income residential area means that it attracts newly arriving migrants, the majority of whom generally have little financial resources on arrival. The choice of Katutura as the study area was therefore strategic, as it made it comparatively easier for researchers to locate study participants there than would have been the case in other parts of the city.

Sampling

Zimbabweans are in Namibia as a result of economic, social, and political reasons. The majority of Zimbabweans in Namibia self-settle among the Namibian population. Identifying these migrants is therefore difficult. To locate Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek, the study focused on Katutura, a low-income area where the majority of the migrants were residing. We randomly chose Okuryangava as a starting point and established contact with two Zimbabwean migrants who were engaged in the informal trade business in the area. These became our first starting points for the study. Having interviewed these participants, we then asked them to refer us to other Zimbabweans in the area. These subsequent respondents were in turn asked to refer the next respondents in a snowball sampling process. This process was repeated until a sufficient sample was identified and interviewed in an area. We then moved to the next area where the process was repeated until the survey was completed in the four selected areas.

The snowball sampling process provided both an efficient and cost-effective method of locating participants, allowing participants to use their local knowledge and networks to identify other participants. The drawback, however, is that as a non-probability sampling strategy, it is impossible to determine the possible sampling error (Sharma, 2017). Hence, the results of this study may not be taken as being representative of the experiences of all the Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek. The

results, however, provide an in-depth understanding of the food-related behaviors, needs, and experiences of the migrants, information critical to informing policy.

Sample size

The researcher conducted 35 in-depth interviews with recent Zimbabwean migrants in Katutura who had arrived in Namibia from 2018 onwards. The rationale for focusing largely on recent migrants was because we envisaged that recent migrants would be generally exposed to shock in terms of dietary changes and also face difficulties in accessing employment and other challenges that had a negative impact on food security. Because Katutura consists of different sub-areas, the study sampled from these areas captured any diversity that may result from them living in these different sub-areas. Thus, the participants came from the following areas: Okuryangava (10); Havana (10); Soweto (10); and One-Nation (5).

The research team interviewed 16 males and 19 female participants as informants from the 35 households. The ages of the participants ranged from 22 to 56 years and their household sizes varied from single-person to four-person households. The occupations of the participants were as follows: traders/vendors (9); unemployed (5); domestic workers/chars (4); taxi drivers (2); agricultural workers (2); shop assistants (2); general construction workers (2); hairdressers (2); bookkeeper (1); self-employed electrician (1); teacher (1); barber (1); self-employed plumber (1); general hand (1); and mechanic (1). The participants were relatively educated, with only two having completed a Grade 7 qualification only. The remainder had attained the following educational status: ordinary level (24); advanced level (4); post-high-school diploma (2); and undergraduate degrees (2).

Data collection

The research team collected data from the identified households using an in-depth interview guide. At each household, a respondent, knowledgeable about household food consumption, was selected by the household to be the informant. Where households were hesitant to do the selection themselves, the researchers randomly selected a respondent through the aid of a dice. Each interview took between 40 to 60 minutes and researchers took notes and recorded the interviews with the consent of the respondents.

Data analysis

The research team analyzed the qualitative data gathered from the respondents thematically. This involved identifying themes and patterns in the data to tell a coherent story. The first step in the data analysis involved listening to the recorded interviews to familiarize themselves with the collected data. The researchers then transcribed the interviews, which was followed by the data coding to generate main themes. Continuous engagement with the data resulted in sub-themes being added.

The write-up process then followed, which entailed a simultaneous engagement with the data, linking the various themes and sub-themes in the analysis. Researchers used direct quotes from the participants to allow for the voices of the participants to be heard, as well as lend authenticity to the households' food security experiences.

STUDY RESULTS

This section presents and discusses the results of the study. While the study specifically focused on the dietary and consumption changes and the impact on household food security, it is deemed prudent to provide brief migration histories of households, as the migration histories lay the groundwork for understanding much of the dietary and food security experiences of the households in their host countries.

Migration histories

At the heart of most of the migrations to Namibia were the challenging economic and political situations in Zimbabwe that made it difficult for households to construct livelihoods. One participant, a 25-year-old male who migrated in 2019, gave a concise description of the situation in Zimbabwe before he left the country:

> I left the country because of the economy. I graduated from university with a finance degree and never worked in a formal job for even a single day in the country. Imagine graduating and celebrating and everyone is looking at you with hope. They are looking forward to you helping in the family. Then you start applying and you do not get a response – not even one. You are okay and have hope for a month; then it turns into many months and a year. Midway through the second year after university, I decided to leave. So, I came here to try my luck. (Participant 12, 27 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).

While Zimbabwe has a good education system (Garwe and Todhlana, 2023) and churns out thousands of graduates every year, employment opportunities are very limited. Many of the graduates find it difficult to penetrate the shrinking job market (Jengeta, 2020). The majority either remain unemployed or get engaged in self-employment (Jengeta, 2020). A 32-year-old female participant who left the country in 2018 confirmed this by saying:

> I never thought I would leave Zimbabwe. I always wanted to stay in the country. I tried to make it work in Zimbabwe, but I failed. I am an electrician. I really never got stable employment. It was a series of short-term jobs and long periods of unemployment. I had no choice, but to leave. It was either I left, or we would struggle all the time or even starve. You cannot borrow all the time … at times, there is even no-one to borrow from. (Participant 16, 29 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).

Other people moved out of the country because of the declining economic conditions, despite having been in employment. According to Madebwe and Madebwe (2017), the economic conditions of Zimbabwe continued to deteriorate after 2000 following the fast-track land reform program. The high inflation rate, sky-rocketing food prices, and other escalating costs pushed even working households into extreme poverty (Mlatsheni and Zvendiya, 2023). As one participant pointed out, the economic conditions worsened to a point where it ceased to make sense to go to work:

> In all honesty, I never dreamed that I would be here in a foreign country trying to make a living. I am 53 years old, and I should be at home with my family and grandchildren. But I am here. From 2003 or so, things were getting tough. But the years 2007 and 2008 were very tough. The salary was just a salary in name. It did not buy anything. After the elections of 2008 I left the country. I never resigned but just left and went to Botswana. It did not work out well there, so I came here. (Participant 34, 06 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

As the above participant shows, it is difficult to separate economic triggers of migration from the political ones, because in Zimbabwe's case, the two are closely linked. The political climate in the country had a severe impact on the economy, which in turn affected people's buying power. In other cases, people migrated as a result of political persecution or fear of being persecuted in the future. Ranga (2015), for example, documents the migration of teachers from the country because of political persecution and violence. However, the participant who reported running away from political persecution in this study also indicated that the political system may have been manipulated by his enemies to target him:

> I was not into politics, but things did not work out well for me. I resigned from my work in 2012 and got a retrenchment package. I used the money to build my home in the village. But some people started a rumor that I got the money from opposition people and trouble started. So, before the elections in 2013, I left. I did not want to be a victim because a lot of people were being harassed, and I was targeted. (Participant 24, 03 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).

While this participant migrated out of fear of political persecution, his experience also raises another angle, that of the intertwining of political and social issues, which result in the migration of those at risk of being persecuted. In a study of the experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in Limpopo, South Africa, Mupondi and Mupakati (2018) also allude to this phenomenon, where only a few migrants from the country predicated their movement on political persecution, despite the increase in secondary data ascribing much movement from the country due to the rise in political intolerance and violence. They argue that this anomaly may be a result of the fact that periods of extreme political violence in Zimbabwe coincided with periods

of acute economic challenges, to the extent that most participants see their economic challenges as taking precedence over political ones in determining their movement (Mupondi and Mupakati, 2018).

The economic conditions in Zimbabwe during the past two decades or so have affected livelihoods negatively, with many households struggling to acquire sufficient food. Thus, some participants pinpointed food challenges as central to their migration. A 30-year-old female hairdresser underscored the role of food shortages as a driver for her migration to Namibia:

> As a single mother, I struggled to look after myself and my two children. We could not afford enough food. I was always crying and asking the Lord what would happen to us. I could not take it anymore in Zimbabwe. A friend who came here a few years ago, invited me to come [to Namibia]. I stayed with her when I arrived in 2020, and she treated me well. Now I am living on my own and working for my children. (Participant 27, 04 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).

In their study exploring youth migration and the food security nexus among Zimbabwean youths in Cape Town, Sithole and Dinbabo (2016) report similar findings, pointing out that some of the youth migration to South Africa had been triggered by food insecurity. While the study reveals a variety of motivations for the participants' movement to Namibia, one theme is common: the need to search for better livelihoods and improve the well-being of their households. It is also true that for many of the participants, a number of triggers worked simultaneously, albeit with varied gravity, to compel them to migrate. But food is a central theme that runs through most of the interviews with the study participants.

Common foods consumed and consumption patterns prior to migration

In Zimbabwe, the foods that are consumed range from traditional (or cultural) foods to Westernized (or modern) diets. Rocillo-Aquino et al. (2021: 8) define traditional foods as those foods "that have been handed down from one generation to the next in terms of knowledge, techniques or practices used in their preparation or in the choice and use of the raw material, which is generally local, as well as the culture that produces it." Muyonga et al. (2017) opine that the traditional African diet generally comprises small grains, such as millet and sorghum, starchy stems, root tubers, wild fruits, fish, game meat, and other plant-based derivatives. Modern or Westernized diets, on the other hand, typically consist of highly processed energy-dense foods (Baker et al., 2020). In Zimbabwe, it is not possible to speak of households consuming a typical traditional diet because of the nutrition transition, which has seen the increase in the consumption of wheat, rice, and other exotic foods (Chopera et al., 2022). Most of the dishes are thus a blend of traditional and Western-influenced dishes.

The interviews with participants showed a wide array of foods consumed by the immigrants prior to their movement. The majority pointed out the consumption of the country's traditional dishes consisting of pap (*sadza*) with different relish dishes. The following interview extracts are illustrative of the main foods consumed prior to emigration:

> I grew up eating *sadza*; and so, our main dish consisted of that meal. We would generally have beef or chicken as relish. Pork meat is not my favorite, so we rarely had a dish with pork. I love vegetables a lot, so I would always have covo, rape or *rugare* with my *sadza*. But not cabbage, it is not my favorite. (Participant 32, 05 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

> Breakfast was usually tea with bread or traditionally made bread (*chimodho*). In the rainy season, we could make bread from green mealies or just substitute green mealies for bread. If it was after the rain season, we could eat a lot of *mbambaira* (sweet potatoes) during breakfast as well. During the day we could nibble on anything that would be available, even left-overs from yesterday. In the evening, it was mostly *sadza*. But my dad likes traditional brown rice; and so, we could have rice instead of *sadza*. Sometimes a cup of tea before we went to sleep, but only when things were fine. We also had *maputi* (popcorn) anytime we wanted, as we had a lot of maize and groundnuts. (Participant 22, 02 December 2022, Havana, Windhoek).

The above narratives indicate beyond doubt the fusion of tradition and modern foods. The foods that participants residing in urban areas in Zimbabwe reported consuming mirrored more modern diets: more processed foods, rice, bread, and fizzy drinks. In contrast, those participants from rural areas generally reported the consumption of more traditional foods:

> We ate many things back there. There were pumpkins, sweet potatoes, and yams for breakfast. We grew a lot of these foods in the village. Then there is a big avocado tree at home and when [it was] in season, we had these avocadoes. Then we had bananas, especially the small, sweet bananas. We would eat these throughout the day whenever we felt like we wanted to. We kept chickens, goats, and turkeys. Meat was not a problem, but we also grew many varieties of vegetables. I ate healthily those days, unlike what I am doing now. (Participant 26, 03 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).

Some study participants also indicated that they would consume traditional drinks and foods like samp, *mahewu* (non-alcoholic beer), *rupiza* (grounded peas), *hohwa* (wild mushroom), *ishwa* (winged termites), and *chimodho* (traditional bread). These

foods are popular in different parts of the country and not necessarily universal across the Zimbabwean society. A participant had this to say:

> I ate a lot of samp in Zimbabwe. In my home area, we mix the crushed maize with groundnuts or beans. This is the food I liked most that we could eat anytime we wanted. There were no restrictions like with other foods, because there is plenty of it. The groundnuts were big and tasty and not the GMOs [genetically modified organisms] that we are eating now. We also ate *rupiza*, which was made from peas. (Participant 26, 03 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).

One of the participants indicated that there were foods that they consumed specifically in certain seasons. These included *derere* (okra), *mufushwa* (dried vegetables), *matemba* (dried *kapenta*), and *manyanya* (a tuber). The first two are vegetables that are dried during the rainy season and are stored for consumption during times of need in the dry season. The third is a tuber that households dig up to supplement their relish during times of need. When prepared well, this tuber is known for having a flavor or taste that approximates meat. The participants said:

> We ate *mufushwa*, especially during the dry season when there was little water for watering the gardens. During the rainy season, we would dry most vegetables, even cabbages, in preparation for the dry season. We could also dry *derere* and consume it in times when relish would be a challenge. (Participant 29, 04 December, One-Nation, Windhoek).

> In my home area we eat *manyanya*. They are very tasty if you prepare them well. I grew up eating them. We also ate *hohwa* a lot. You know, mushroom grows in the bush; it just grows there, and we would pick it up and cook. If we got plenty, we could dry it and store [the rest] for later. (Participant 14, 28 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).

There were special foods that participants pointed out as foods in their diet that were consumed on special occasions. Shipman and Durmus (2017) maintain that although food is considered an intake of nourishment to survive, it also embodies a people's social and cultural meanings. Some participants indicated that there are foods that are prepared mostly on occasions such as weddings, holidays, and cultural gatherings or for visitors. One participant indicated that if a visitor came to their place, they would make it a point to slaughter a chicken:

> It is customary in my culture to slaughter a chicken for a visitor. It does not matter that the visitor is rich and can buy their own chicken. When they visit,

> we show them our appreciation of their visit by killing a chicken. (Participant 31, 05 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

Sometimes a special occasion demands that an abundance food be prepared. On occasions such as weddings, households go out of their way to prepare many of the foods that they rarely prepare on a daily basis. This includes preparing salads and meals with many courses. On graduations and birthdays, food is prepared with extravagance, and this is the same at cultural gatherings.

Current diets and consumption patterns of migrant households

There are many studies that have been carried out in the Global North that show that migrants tend to adopt the foods and food habits of the countries that they settle in after immigration (Vu et al., 2020). This may be influenced primarily by the fact that migrants may find it challenging to access the food that they were used to consuming before migration. Researchers asked Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek to indicate the foods that they were consuming after migration. The majority indicated a predominance of highly processed foods, mirroring a diet more Westernized than before their migration. They identified the following foods:

> In the morning, I usually eat cereals. I like cornflakes, though I can also have Weetbix. I can eat these for breakfast every morning, unless I run out of milk. I eat my lunch at work – a bunny-chow or a burger. There is a tuck-shop close to my workplace where I buy [the food]. If I have money, I buy a Coca Cola; otherwise, I bring my own diluted juice from home. For supper, I eat rice or spaghetti, but my husband likes *sadza*; so, most days I have to cook *sadza* too. (Participant 8, 25 November 2022, Okuryangava, Windhoek).

> We have tea in the morning. It is usually bread and butter. If we can afford, we may have eggs as well or sausage. In fact, it's usually sausage [rather] than eggs, as eggs are very expensive. Since the bird flu a few months ago, the eggs are very expensive. I sometimes buy chips at work. There is no time to cook; so, I buy [food] from a fish and chips [shop] close by. When I come back home, it depends on whether I am tired or not. If I am tired, I bring chips and fish, and that will be our dinner. If I am not tired, we can cook something, maybe rice or *sadza*. (Participant 22, 02 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).

Most of the foods that the above participants indicated consuming are highly processed. A common thread is that they buy their lunch at work, usually due to inadequate time to prepare meals, since they will be at work most of the day. Hence, it becomes easier to purchase ready-to-eat food from the various food places in the city. As participant 22 points out, even preparing food for supper depends on whether they are not tired. If they are, then supper will consist of takeaway food. This

is supported by another participant who indicated that it saves time to purchase food from the several restaurants, fish-and-chips shops, and other street vendors that sell ready-to-eat food:

> Life here is very fast. You wake up in the morning, and there are many things to do. In the construction industry, work is intense, such that you do not find enough time to prepare your own meals. I leave home before 5:30 a.m. every morning and come back around 7 p.m. When I leave, I have no time to prepare, and I am not hungry at that time, anyway. When I come back, I am too tired to cook. So, I purchase most of my food ready to eat. (Participant 4, 24 November 2022, Okuryangava, Windhoek).

Another participant, a 32-year-old taxi driver, shared a similar sentiment, emphasizing the intensity of his work schedule in determining what he eats and when he eats. For him, a proper diet is only possible on his day off:

> I am used to eating anything here. I start work very early in the morning. To make my first trip at 5:30 a.m., I have to leave here at 5 a.m., so that I can pick up the taxi from the owner's house in Eros. Then I start my trip and only finish work at 9 p.m. So, most of my food, I eat on the road. (Participant 1, 23 November 2022, Okuryangava, Windhoek).

For participants who have the time to prepare their meals, their diets are determined by the foods that they purchase. One participant indicated that the diet is monotonous because it does not change – the result of always buying food that is cheaper:

> The diet is the same every day. It's tea and bread, *sadza* or rice and meat every day. There is no variety. Although I like noodles, but after two or three days, I do not want them anymore. I don't know, maybe if I had enough money, I would go to the city and buy something different. (Participant 11, 27 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).

The presence of fast-food outlets has also seen some of the migrants eating out more often than in the pre-migration period. One participant indicated that she often eats out to have access to the variety of foods that restaurants serve:

> On my days off work, I usually go with my husband and child to restaurants in the city so that we can experience the different foods that the city has to offer. When we were in Zimbabwe, we had no money to eat out. Now we can afford to go out once in a while. I like seafood, so we usually go to Ocean Basket at the mall. It's a bit expensive, buy we enjoy [the food] there. (Participant 16, 29 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).

Another participant pointed out that the presence of many street traders selling *kapana* (braai meat) in her area meant that they could prepare just rice or *sadza* at home and then buy *kapana*. Thus, although the food consumption patterns of Zimbabwean migrants are shaped by choice, they are also determined by time constraints and the need to buy cheaper foods and make savings.

Foods that migrants have challenges accessing and consuming less

When people migrate to a new country, the possibility that they will experience challenges in accessing certain foods is high. Study participants indicated that there are foods that they are unable to find or are different from what they usually consumed in Zimbabwe. This was the case with most traditional foods. One of these key foods was *dovi* (peanut butter). Participants indicated that peanut butter is integral to many meals that they prepare: consuming it in porridge, spreading it on bread, and on dried vegetables, dried meat and other dishes. Many of the participants complained that the peanut butter that they purchase in shops does not taste the same. One participant had this to say:

> I love porridge made from maize meal and mixed with peanut butter. When I go home, I always bring some, but it does not last. I am then forced to purchase from the supermarkets here. It is not the same taste, as the one from the shops is almost tasteless, like there is no salt in it. I have tried adding salt, but it does not improve it. Maybe the peanuts are not well-roasted and so the taste is different. (Participant 2, 23 November 2022, Okuryangava, Windhoek).

While these migrants had an option to purchase from traders that sell their home products, the challenge was that they were always in short supply. During the period when COVID-19 was at its peak, travel restrictions meant that there was either little supply or no supply at all. The second challenge was that those who sell the Zimbabwean peanut butter put a premium on it so that it becomes largely unaffordable to those of a very low-income status. The sellers justify their exorbitant prices claiming that they pay a lot of money to import the peanut butter. This, however, makes it difficult for some migrants to consume foods that they want:

> Peanut butter from Zimbabwe is expensive. They [traders] buy it for less than US$1 (N$19) in Zimbabwe and then they sell it here for between N$30 and N$40. That is too much for 375 grams. But there is nothing you can do; if you want it, you just have to buy [it]. (Participant 8, 25 November 2022, Okuryangava, Windhoek).

Thus, for migrants to access the food they require from home, they have to pay more than their counterparts back in Zimbabwe. When resources are minimal, this means that the migrants have to do without it, and some may resort to buying the

local variety that they are not used to; hence, it impacts negatively on their food security. Some foods that were difficult to access and acquire were *mbambaira* (sweet potatoes). Most interviewees indicated that sweet potatoes are a part of their diet, serving as a substitute for bread at breakfast and can also be consumed as a snack. While some varieties of sweet potatoes were available on the market, these were not firm and were also less sweet:

> I have stopped buying sweet potatoes here. It is a waste of money. When they are raw, they look very good and appetizing. You only realize when you start cooking them that they are not good – they start losing shape very quickly and are watery. You end up eating [them] with a spoon like you are eating mashed potatoes. The taste is not okay – there is nothing sweet about them. (Participant 35, 06 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

Study participants indicated that some traders bring the sweet potatoes from Zimbabwe using the cross-border buses. The supply, however, was irregular and unreliable. The sweet potatoes are therefore a commodity in demand, with few suppliers failing to satisfy the market. Like the peanut butter, the *mbambaira* is also said to be expensive, as traders capitalize on shortages to drive the commodity price upwards.

Namibia is known for its fish industry where a variety of fish species (e.g., mackerel, tuna, hake) are sold on the market. But most Zimbabwean migrants grew up eating fresh-water breams from Lake Kariba on the Zambezi Valley. Some participants indicated that they missed the Kariba bream. While they are adventurous and try other fish varieties, many still look for the fresh-water breams. Thus, some traders bring the dried breams from Zimbabwe to sell among the Zimbabwean community in the country. A participant had this to say:

> I occasionally buy the bream from the Zambezi region. It is better, but not like the Kariba bream. Once in a while when I find someone selling the dried Kariba bream, then that makes my day. (Participant 32, 06 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

Among one of the most sought-after foods by Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek is Mazoe Orange Crush – a Zimbabwean cordial that is made from oranges. While some supermarkets in the city occasionally sell the juice, some argue that it is not original. Hence, most of the migrants prefer to purchase from informal traders who bring it straight from Zimbabwe. While it is sold for around US$2.50 in Zimbabwe (approximately N$47), informal traders sell it for between N$60 and N$80 per 2-liter bottle. One participant revealed why they prefer to purchase from the traders:

> I buy my Mazoe from traders that come with it from Zimbabwe. The variety that is sold here is not authentic. It does not taste the same. And some is made

> in Zambia and not Zimbabwe. So, they are different. I prefer the original one. (Participant 20, 02 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).

The majority of Zimbabwean migrants grew up in areas where avocadoes are grown by most households, and hence, cheaper and easier to access. Interviewees complained that the avocadoes in Windhoek are small and very expensive. Many of these avocadoes are imported from South Africa and resultantly are sold at a premium. Many of the migrants thus cannot afford them. Some only consume what is occasionally sent from home. Some participants pointed out that they missed eating these foods and only indulge in this delicacy when they are back home in Zimbabwe.

Like the Kariba bream, one of the difficult foods for Zimbabwean migrants to access in Windhoek is dried *kapenta*. In Zimbabwe, dried *kapenta* is a regular relish. However, most participants indicated that in Windhoek, *kapenta* was expensive and also difficult to find:

> I do not remember the last time that I ate dried *kapenta*. It is one of my favorite foods, but it is difficult to get here. If you get it, they sell [it] in very small packets. If you are a family of four people, then you will need two or three packets to suffice. For N$10 a packet, if you buy three packets, then that's N$30 and you may as well buy meat. (Participant 26, 03 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).

While the increased consumption of rice is often associated with the nutrition transition, it does not necessarily mean that most African households did not consume rice frequently. Rather, their consumption was usually centered on the brown rice that many households in the rural areas would produce themselves. A few of the interviewed households reported that they grew up eating brown rice, as opposed to the white rice or the parboiled rice that is now dominating in food shops. The absence of brown rice in Windhoek therefore means that they only consume it when they travel back home. In some cases, migrants are duped by informal traders selling substitute products. Their desperation to access traditional foods may be exploited by dishonest traders who have no regard for any negative consequences resulting from consuming the wrong foods. One participant said:

> Some two years ago, I was duped by a fellow Zimbabwean. I asked him if he knew someone who sells mice, and he indicated that he did. I gave him N$50 and he brought the mice at the bar when we were drinking. I, however, did not eat them but carried them home. In the morning, I realized that these may not be mice, but rats. They were big – very big. When I confronted him, he said he had just bought them from a passer-by, but I suspect he was lying. I just threw them all away, but I never got my money back. (Participant 24, 03 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).

Besides the foods discussed above, some migrants indicated that they use different ways to access Zimbabwean foods. One of the most common methods is to ask their friends and relatives in Zimbabwe to send whatever foods they want through cross-border transporters (*omalayitshas*) and through regular buses that ply the Namibia-Zimbabwe route. These transporters charge a transportation fee, depending on the contents and weight of the transported package.

Impact of changing diets and consumption patterns of food security

Diets and food security are closely linked, as food (in)security is an outcome of what is consumed by the households, both in terms of quality and quantity. The types of foods that one consumes determine whether one can be considered food secure. Several health outcomes are also an indicator of food security. Ford (2013), for example, opines that there is a relationship between household food insecurity, diet, and a number of health-related diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and heart diseases. Migrants, because of their precarious employment, are likely to have low incomes, less access to food, and hence, also likely to have higher levels of food insecurity in comparison to the local population.

While the healthy-immigrant paradox argues that newly arriving migrants may exhibit better food security and health outcomes than the local population, there was little evidence in this survey that this was the case. Rather, Zimbabwean migrants indicated that they were at risk of food insecurity. When asked about their current household food security situation in comparison to their situation prior to emigration from their country, a majority of the participants indicated that their situation had improved. According to one participant:

> When I left Zimbabwe, I was struggling, unable to put food on the table. A whole mechanic failing to buy basic foodstuffs. Here I am better because whenever I get a piece job and complete it, I am able to buy enough food for my family. (Participant 34, 06 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

Another participant indicated that moving to Namibia saved her sanity and gave her options at a time when she was running out of options. Had she remained in the country, she believed that she could have gone into depression or even resorted to death by suicide:

> I am grateful that I was able to come here. Even though I still face many challenges with my family, I am certain that we are now better than we were before. Our children are going to school, and even though we cannot give them all they want, we are at least trying. In Zimbabwe, we had reached a dead-end, and it was pitiful. Imagine working and your salary [is] not [sufficient for] buying anything. (Participant 16, 29 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).

There were also other participants who emphasized that migrating gave them hope, even though they have not attained what they left Zimbabwe for. They acknowledged that the challenges they currently face are better than what they would be facing, had they remained in Zimbabwe. One participant said:

> I do not regret coming here. I wish I had come here sooner rather than when I did. I wasted my time thinking that things would improve. But they never did. Here we can struggle, but it is better because at the end of the day, you can put food on the table. That is what matters. (Participant 17, 29 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).

There were, however, other participants who indicated that they were facing significant challenges related to food security while in Namibia. Their major issue was that of the high cost of rentals. They indicated that they were spending more on rentals than on food items. The rentals were so high, that it left them with very little money for food. They thus periodically resorted to buying cheap food that they did not like:

> I came here to work and save so that I can go home and start a business. But for the past four years, that has not been possible. Instead, I seem to be working for rentals only. At the end of the month, I cannot even afford to eat out at the restaurants. I end up buying the cheaper foods that are even dangerous for my health. Some of the fizzy drinks that we buy are laced with many chemicals, [so] that it is just a health hazard to us. But we have no choice. (Participant 30, 05 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

The fact that some migrants resorted to eating foods that they did not want is an indicator of food insecurity. While the participants preferred Mazoe Orange, they ended up buying some cheaper alternatives whose health implications they do not know. Hence, others argued that the health problems that they currently experience are a result of some of the foods they were consuming. As one participant pointed out, the fact that one gets sick because of inappropriate food, defeats the very purpose of having migrated to Namibia in the first place. The little money one makes will also end up paying increasing medical bills resulting from the consumption of poor foods:

> I was once a strong person, lifting heavy things with ease. As a mechanic, you need to be strong, but now I am weak. I suspect that it is these foods that we are eating that are causing all this. Some of the foods we eat are like poison. Unfortunately, we will die because of this food, instead of doing better. (Participant 32, 06 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

One participant pointed out that she had gained a lot of weight since she came to Namibia. She attributed this weight gain to the consumption of junk foods. She argued that this would not have happened were she consuming proper foods. Hence, for some migrants, their food security situation has been bad because of the foods they were consuming. Ultimately, their health situation will be affected negatively.

DISCUSSION

Zimbabwe generates significant migration streams, largely triggered by a persistent, challenging socio-economic and political environment. While many studies underscore the critical role of political persecution in triggering large-scale emigration, many of the interviewed migrants highlighted the dire economic situation in the country as a trigger for migration. Thus, food insecurity acted as a major migration trigger. These study results validated the arguments made by Carney and Krause (2020) that in environments of economic distress, food insecurity compels household members to emigrate.

The study findings have established that it is difficult to talk of the pre-migration diets of Zimbabwean migrants as being completely traditional or fully Westernized. This finding validates the assertion by Chopera et al. (2022) that, because of the nutrition transition, most Zimbabwean households survive on consuming a blend of traditional and Westernized dishes. In moving to Namibia, most migrants, however, reported experiencing significant changes to their diets. These changes center primarily on four issues. The first concerns the non-availability of foods that migrants consumed while still in Zimbabwe. Migrants reported having challenges accessing foods such as *traditional mahewu* (a non-alcoholic beer), *rupiza* (grounded peas), *hohwa* (wild mushroom), *ishwa* (winged termites), *matemba* (dried *kapenta*), and *manyanya* (a tuber). The second issue centers on the poor quality of some substitute foods acquired in their new environment. This was the case with foods such as *dovi* (peanut butter), *mbambaira* (sweet potatoes), *kapenta*, Mazoe Orange Crush (a cordial) and some types of fish, especially fresh-water breams. Most migrants found the taste of locally available substitutes unappealing and hence opted to do without these foods.

The third issue is about the increased food expenses for those households that go to great length to acquire food from their home country. Study results indicate that some migrants were willing to pay more to acquire food from traders or pay more to *omalayitshas* to bring traditional foods from Zimbabwe. This substantially increased migrant households' food costs, potentially having negative impacts on household food security. The fourth issue was about limited time to prepare some foods. Most migrants indicated spending more time on the job, resulting in most consuming more foods outside their homes, and drastically reducing consumption of foods such as beans, or offal that are critical to maintaining food security.

Results regarding the food security outcomes were rather mixed, with most households indicating that household food security had significantly improved, while

others pointed out the food challenges they were encountering, including possible negative outcomes in terms of their health. Coming from a country experiencing serious economic challenges, the majority of interviewees could afford to buy most food as and when required, contrary to the pre-migration situation where shops in Zimbabwe could run out of food stocks at any time. Food challenges, however, related to accessing foods that were traditional and appropriate, hence, necessitating drastic changes in foods consumed. Surviving on some substitute foods reflects unfulfilled food needs, resulting in a degree of food insecurity. For some migrants, failing to access the foods they want also affected them negatively, as they felt that they were getting out of touch with their traditional food regime. They also argued that failure to access some foods means that they were losing on some health benefits, and this could impact negatively on their health as well as on their longevity.

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted important food security issues, focusing on food availability, food access, food choices, and cultural appropriateness. The theoretical framing underpinning this study argued that migrants generally exhibit a foreign-born advantage, wherein they arrive with certain advantages that the local poor population may not have. The results from this study were, however, different. Recent migrants were experiencing numerous economic and social challenges that had negative impacts on their food security. Many struggled to get employment and were saddled with high rentals and also took time to understand their new food environment, much to their detriment. Ultimately, they were neither better resourced nor healthier than the local population in Windhoek. Thus, the theoretical supposition that the migrants would be better off than locals did not hold true, as many struggled to afford adequate and culturally appropriate foods. Migrants, therefore, remain vulnerable to food insecurity, despite most having migrated to improve their livelihoods.

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Solving the Cape Town Puzzle: Class, Politics, and Migration in the Informal Food Economy

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Abstract

Political empowerment possesses significant potential to facilitate the realization of economic inclusion by allowing marginalized groups to make claims on the state in the pursuit of justice and equality. This is particularly promising for individuals engaged in informal economic activity. Cape Town, South Africa, is in many ways a model for this idea: following its post-apartheid democratization process, governments at the local, provincial, and national levels officially recognize the value of informality and have adopted policies to support it. Yet persistent forms of exclusion for those who engage in informal economic activity remain. This article examines why this is the case. In doing so, it explores the forms of marginalization experienced by migrant and non-migrant workers in the Cape Town's informal food economy and highlights the importance of three factors in explaining why democratization has not translated into greater inclusion: (1) the contours of inequality in the city; (2) the nature of local and national party politics; and (3) the specific dynamics that surround migration and informality. When seeking to translate institutional change into more inclusive forms of development, it emphasizes the importance of paying attention to both open democratic structures and processes and the forms of politics that fill them.

Keywords: informal economy, political rights, economic and social rights, development, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Informal economic activity is inherently characterized by exclusion. Given that it takes place at least in part outside of official legal and regulatory structures, those who engage in it cannot access the formal benefits of economic, social, and political life and the protections that it entails. A potentially promising source of empowerment is political rights, as they would not only guarantee basic forms of democratic participation for informal workers, but also, more specifically, facilitate their agency by ensuring that politicians are responsive to popular opinion and, under the right conditions, providing an incentive to pursue pro-poor policies.

Cape Town provides an ideal setting in which to explore this relationship between political rights and economic and social rights. South Africa has undergone a profound transformation since the end of apartheid. In the wake of high levels of direct state violence, political exclusion, exploitation, and impoverishment to maintain a hierarchical, racialized system dominated by, and for the benefit of, white South Africans, the coming of democracy in 1994 saw a significant transformation of the South African state through the redesign and de-racialization of its core institutions and the introduction of a new social contract in which an extensive set of rights are notionally guaranteed. Yet economic and social rights, despite existing in principle, are elusive in practice, as the country still struggles to overcome the legacies of its apartheid history. This is particularly true in Cape Town's informal economy, where political rights have not translated into economic and social rights, creating what this article refers to "the Cape Town puzzle." Much work needs to be done if the promise of democratization is to be realized and fully benefit some of the most marginalized members of society.

The informal economy is central to the livelihoods of migrants. According to a 2019 report by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), in 2017, 29.3% of migrants in South Africa worked in the informal economy (Stats SA, 2019: 46). While this represented a decline from 33.9% in 2012, it was still notably higher than comparable rates for non-movers and internal migrants at 17.4% and 13.7%, respectively (Stats SA, 2019).[2] The consequences of this are profound. Although, at 29.6%, a higher share of migrants aged 15–24 were classified as not in employment, education, or training (NEET) in 2017, migrants had a significantly lower unemployment rather than both non-movers and internal migrants, at 18.4%, 29.1%, and 25.8%, respectively, suggesting that the informal economy offers a crucial source of livelihood support (Stats SA, 2019). As will be explored in this paper, the informal economy can provide certain forms of support that are uniquely valuable to migrants; it can also present challenges that migrants are uniquely vulnerable to.

[2] This article uses the term "migrant" interchangeably with "immigrant," the latter defined in the Stats SA report referenced here (2019: 6) as "[a]n individual who was enumerated in a province in South Africa (SA), but who indicated that they were not born in SA." An internal migrant (referred to in the report as an "internal-migrant"), in contrast, is "[a]n individual who was born in a particular province, and was enumerated in a different province," whereas a non-mover is "[a]n individual who was born in a particular province and was enumerated in the same province." (Stats SA, 2019: 6).

This article examines the failure to ensure economic and social rights for both non-migrants and, in particular, migrants in Cape Town's informal economy, arguing that this can be attributed to the intersection of inequality, party politics and the realities of migration. Stressing the importance of pairing a focus on protections for informal workers with a broader emphasis on formal employment and anti-poverty measures, it illustrates how the link between political inclusion and economic and social inclusion rests on core assumptions about how political systems operate and how voters and politicians behave within them, many of which do not hold in Cape Town, especially for migrants. Economic and social rights, it maintains, must complement political rights if societies are truly to become more just and inclusive, and if those who have been most marginalized are to be meaningfully incorporated into forms of political, economic, and social life from which they have previously been excluded.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: the next section presents a brief outline of the methodology employed in this study and defines its scope and significance. The following section explores South Africa's transition from an apartheid to a post-apartheid state, offering a brief overview of how both political rights and economic and social rights have been recognized in the country and discussing the extent to which they have been realized in practice. The following section examines how economic and social rights in Cape Town's informal economy are defined by a failure to address issues surrounding poverty and unemployment that define informality and are particularly acute for migrants. Attention is then turned to the question of why the realization of political rights has not facilitated a similar realization of economic and social rights in Cape Town's informal economy. An explanation that is rooted in the intersection of inequality, the local and national political landscape in which governance occurs, and migration is offered, with a focus on the South Africa general election of 2019. The article concludes by stressing the importance of pairing a focus on economic and social rights with political rights in the informal economy if, for the benefit of both non-migrants and migrants, the Cape Town puzzle is to be solved.

METHODOLOGY

This article relies on several data sources to offer an analysis of the structural challenges to inclusion that migrants face in Cape Town's informal food economy. Most notably, it discusses the results of a survey of 450 migrant entrepreneurs in the informal food sector undertaken by the Hungry Cities Partnership (HCP) in 2021–2022.[3] This survey captures the considerable diversity that defines the informal food economy in Cape Town, detailing the responses of 262 male and 188 female respondents in 11 different areas throughout the city. Reflecting the significance of Cape Town, and South Africa more generally, as a hub for Global South migration, particularly in

[3] While the author was not involved in designing or carrying out this survey, he had previously worked with, and has subsequently rejoined, the Hungry Cities Partnership.

sub-Saharan Africa, respondents came from at least 23 different countries: Angola, Bangladesh, Burundi, Cameroon, Congo (Brazzaville), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.[4] Respondents also conducted their businesses in a variety of locations: permanent stalls in markets; permanent stalls on the street; temporary stalls on the street; in vehicles; in containers; in spaza shops; in their homes; in customers' homes; in a shop in a house, yard, or garage; in workshops or shops; in restaurants; in taxi ranks on the side of the road; in permanent structures in taxi or public transport stations; or elsewhere. Some were mobile vendors with no fixed location. Others used multiple locations. Questions covered a broad range of issues concerning respondents' backgrounds, experiences, and business activities, many of which are discussed in detail below.

As this article places a significant emphasis on the nature of South African politics and involves an analysis of the 2019 South Africa general election, it is worth briefly touching upon the 2024 general election and the potential significance of the drop in support for the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the formation of a Government of National Unity. It is, at the time of writing, too early to know what these changes will mean for the political economy of informality in the country, and therefore in Cape Town, and how this will impact migrants in particular. The extent to which it points to a potential end of ANC national hegemony in the country is uncertain, particularly as the decline in its vote share corresponded with the rise of uMkhonto weSizwe, a party founded by disgraced former President and leader of the ANC, Jacob Zuma, at the end of 2023. Should this reflect a fundamental shift in voting behavior, and should it ultimately lead to more accountability, responsiveness, and effectiveness in governance through greater political competition, the trends discussed in this article may become a matter of historical rather than contemporary significance. Observers of South African politics will surely look forward to seeing whether this transpires.

In examining the experiences of migrants in Cape Town's informal food economy, this article seeks to draw broader conclusions about the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in informal economies more generally. While this article refers to the Cape Town puzzle, the puzzle that it seeks to address – why greater political rights have not led to the realization of adequate economic and social rights in the informal economy, particularly for migrants – is relevant to cities across South Africa and, in various ways, across the Global South, given the extent to which it can shed light on obstacles to greater inclusion for a particularly marginalized segment of the urban population and potential pathways around these. The specific problems that it discusses are unique to Cape Town; inequality, party politics, informality, and migration, however, are not, and demand more attention in efforts to understand the circumstances in which democratization can ultimately lead to greater inclusion.

[4] Two respondents listed "Other".

THE END OF APARTHEID AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's post-apartheid constitution (RSA, 1996), as Von Holdt (2013: 592–593) notes, emerged from an environment of heightened levels of state violence and struck an uneasy balance between the pressures of protecting property owners and the desire to address obvious forms of injustice. Yet, adopted on 8 May 1996, it offers far-reaching rights protections. Affirming the country as a "democratic state" (Section 1), it contains a Bill of Rights that includes, among other provisions, the right to equality (Section 9), human dignity (Section 10) and the "freedom and the security of the person" (Section 12; quoted from Section 12(1)). The Bill of Rights explicitly outlines a list of political rights that are held by all South Africans, including the right to form, participate in, and recruit members for a political party and campaign for a political party or cause; the right "to free, fair and regular elections for any legislative body established in terms of the Constitution"; and the right to vote in any election for such a body through a secret ballot, to stand for public office, and to assume such an office if elected (Section 19; quoted from Section 19(2)). It also declares that South Africans have the right "to choose their trade, occupation or profession freely" although this "may be regulated by law" and the provision notably refers to citizens rather than individuals more generally (Section 22; also see Young (2020, 9–10)). All South Africans are "equally entitled to the rights, privileges and benefits of citizenship" and "equally subject to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship" (Section 3(2)), a notable break from the apartheid era. These rights, however, are based on a foundation of citizenship, therefore placing non-citizen migrants outside of their protection. This is, in itself, unremarkable; indeed, a defining feature of citizenship is that it confers rights on those who hold it that others are excluded from. It also, however, places migrants in a position where they possess fewer rights than non-migrants, and from which they are therefore less able to make claims to the state for the basic protections they might otherwise expect.

Political rights in South Africa have largely been realized. Regular elections with universal franchise are held in the country at all levels of government, and, since the introduction of democracy in 1994, have been consistently won at the national level by the ANC, the party that led the struggle against apartheid, with a majority of the vote, a notable achievement in a multiparty democracy.[5] This record of upholding political rights compares favorably to much of sub-Saharan Africa (see, for example, Freedom House, n.d.). The realization of economic and social rights, however, has seen less progress. The South African state has made efforts to address the racialized socio-economic disparities that have persisted since the end of apartheid, most notably through the program of Black Economic Empowerment that encompasses efforts to promote employment equity and Black ownership in the economy (Southall, 2007). It also offers forms of direct livelihood support that can aid the most marginalized; of the over 18 million South Africans receiving social

[5] National vote totals from 1994 to 2019 are presented in Schulz-Herzenberg (2019: 464).

grants, relief assistance, or social relief in 2019, more than 16 million were Black (based on Statista, 2021). Yet socio-economic inequality remains high and, although many Black South Africans have indeed seen significant, and sometimes dramatic, improvements in their socio-economic status, highly racialized. As Seekings (2008: 7) notes, while a diverse economic elite and middle class now exists, the country's working class is made up of mostly Africans and the poor are almost universally African. The lived experience of poverty in the country remains high and has recently worsened, with an Afrobarometer survey finding that the number of people who have gone without food, water, medicines or medical treatment, cooking fuel and cash income at least once in the past year increased between 2015 and 2018 (Chingwete, 2019: 5) despite the fact that the constitution guarantees the right to "healthcare services" and "sufficient food and water" (Sections 27(1)(a) and 27(1)(b)). South Africa's official unemployment rate in the third quarter of 2023 was 31.9%, up from 25.5% in the third quarter of 2015 (Stats SA, 2023: 12); other estimates suggest that it surpassed the level it was at in 1994 in 2010 and now far exceeds what it was around the end of apartheid (World Bank Open Data, n.d.-c). World Bank data suggests that South Africa is the most unequal country in the world (World Bank Open Data, n.d.-a),[6] and that inequality levels, despite an uneven decline since peaking in 2005, were higher in 2014 than they were in 1993 (World Bank Open Data, n.d.-b). The country's cities remain deeply unequal and highly segregated, with the latter, Seekings declared in 2008, providing "[p]erhaps the most striking evidence of the resilience of race" in the country (2008, 11; also see 11–14). Using an alternative measure to the World Bank, Euromonitor International named Johannesburg, the country's largest city, as the most unequal in the world in 2017, with Cape Town fifth (Razvadauskas, 2017).[7]

South Africa's democracy itself faces significant challenges. Despite the country's recent history of undemocratic rule, there are signs that its people are losing faith in its democratic institutions and processes. An Afrobarometer poll found that only 54% of respondents in South Africa in 2018 believed that democracy is preferable to any alternative form of government, down from 70% in 2011 and the fifth lowest figure for 34 African countries surveyed from 2016 to 2018 (Dryding, 2020: 2–4). Only 61% agreed that leaders should be chosen in "regular, open, and honest elections," down from 83% in 2006 (Dryding, 2020: 5), while 62% claimed to be willing to "give up regular elections and live" under a "non-elected government or leader" who "could impose law and order, and deliver houses and jobs" (Dryding, 2020: 11). Concerns about poor governance, corruption, and state capture compound the limited progress that governments at all levels have made in addressing the country's ingrained socio-economic problems, making the apparent success of the country's post-apartheid system appear increasingly less assured.

South Africa's record of promoting and protecting a broad spectrum of human rights since the end of apartheid is therefore mixed. Although extensive political

[6] Country figures vary by most recent year available.

[7] This source uses the Palma ratio to measure income inequality. The World Bank data discussed above relies on the Gini index.

rights and economic and social rights exist in principle, the latter often remain unrealized in practice. Cape Town's informal economy provides useful insights into why this is the case and what its consequences might be.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS IN CAPE TOWN'S INFORMAL ECONOMY

Cape Town's informal economy illustrates many of the problems that have come to characterize the realization of rights in post-apartheid South Africa for both migrants and non-migrants alike. The legacies of apartheid are again obvious. Under apartheid, major restrictions were imposed on the ability of Black South Africans to engage in business activities, and those taking place in public places were heavily policed (Skinner, 2019: 417–418). More broadly, Black South Africans were made to acquire permits to live and work in cities and could only do so if they had formal employment, while the state sought to control the growth of cities through forced relocations and, later, permitting the growth of peripheral urban areas to facilitate labor exploitation while maintaining separation (Abrahams et al., 2018: 4–7). Such overt and coercive efforts by the state to enforce socio-economic exclusion came to an end with the end of apartheid. Their impact, however, remains.

The policy landscape for governing informal economic activity has shifted considerably since the end of apartheid.[8] The City of Cape Town (CoCT) has adopted an Informal Trading By-Law and an Informal Trading Policy, both of which are apparently centered on a "developmental approach" that seeks to integrate informal trading into urban development (CoCT, 2009, Section 1.3; 2013, Section 4.1.2.1 and Section 5).[9] Stressing the "role that informal trading plays in poverty alleviation, income generation and entrepreneurial development" and acknowledging the "positive impact" that it "has on historically disadvantaged individuals and communities" (Section 1.2), the Informal Trading By-Law declares a "[f]reedom to engage in informal trading" throughout the city in accordance with relevant regulatory and legal provisions (Section 4). Despite these developments, however, problems remain that demonstrate the shortcomings of South Africa's transition. Of crucial importance here is the fact that poverty and unemployment remain defining features of Cape Town's informal economy. A survey of informal food vendors conducted by the HCP in 2017 found that the two most common reasons given by traders for entering the informal economy are the need for money for survival and the desire for greater family financial security, while the fifth most common reason is

[8] For a detailed overview of these changes, see Skinner (2019) and Rogerson (2016a, 2016b). For an analysis of the various forms of governance that exist in Cape Town's informal economy, with a focus on its informal food economy, see Young (2020).

[9] Informal trading, as defined in the City's Informal Trading Policy and Informal Trading By-Law, encompasses many, but not all, of the categories of informal trade engaged in by respondents to the HCP migrant informal food entrepreneur survey this paper discusses (as outlined in the methodology section). See CoCT (2009, Section 3.1; and 2013, Section 4.2). The Informal Trading Policy employs a definition of the informal sector from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey encompassing both employers and employees and includes all relevant activity "which takes place on public space, or private land where it is included in a trading plan" (CoCT, 2013, Section 2.1.1 and quoted from Section 4.2.1).

unemployment and the inability to find a job.[10] Interestingly, while 57.7% of migrant food vendors in the later survey highlighted the need to find a job, more highlighted the desire to run their own business, the belief they had the right personality, the desire to do something new and challenging, the desire to learn new skills, the risk to challenge themselves, their desire to increase their status in the community, and the desire to have more control over their own time and be their own boss. Still, needing money to survive and wanting to give family greater financial security were the two most popular choices, with the desire to make money to send to their home country coming in fourth behind control over time and being their own boss.

The primary challenges that informal food vendors identified in the 2017 survey surround similar concerns, with over half of respondents citing a lack of customers (75.3%), too many competitors (69.4%), high prices charged by suppliers (66%) and poor sales (59.6%).[11] These four are again the most significant obstacles highlighted by migrants, but at significantly higher rates: 89.2% for too few customers, 87.8% for too much competition, 89.8% for suppliers charging too much, and 88.7% for insufficient sales. Poverty is central to explaining the trends that can be observed in these survey responses: individuals are driven into the informal economy due to livelihood needs, but the limited purchasing power of their potential customers and the oversupply of labor represent major problems once they are there (also see Young, 2020: 20–22).

Despite the apparent goal of facilitating development, and although important protections are provided by the legislative and constitutional environment, the governance of informality in Cape Town can be heavily regulatory and, at times, coercive. The 2017 HCP survey of informal food vendors also found 11.5% reported often or sometimes having their goods confiscated by the police, 7.8% experienced harassment or demands for bribes from the police, 5.5% had been physically attacked or assaulted by the police and 4.1% had either experienced or had their employees experience arrest or detention (Tawodzera and Crush, 2019: 38). The later survey of migrant entrepreneurs suggests that these figures are notably higher for migrants and refugees, with 38.2% reporting confiscations, 17.7% reporting harassment or demands for bribes, 10.4% reporting physical attacks or assault, and 10.4% again reporting arrest or detention (also see Tawodzera et al., 2015: 41). The city's Informal Trading By-Law requires all informal traders to hold a valid permit, provides an extensive list of the conditions under which informal trading can take place, and empowers officers to confiscate goods when these conditions are repeatedly violated.[12] Of 450 migrant entrepreneurs in Cape Town's informal food economy surveyed,

[10] Tawodzera and Crush (2019: 10). These results are also presented, along with a similar analysis to what is presented here, in Young (2020: 20–21). This survey used a different definition of informality than the one that is presented in the Informal Trading By-Law, as it includes traders in workshops or shops, homes and restaurants, none of which are mentioned in – although neither are they explicitly excluded from – the definition included in the by-law. These, however, remain a minority of respondents (see Tawodzera and Crush, 2019: 3–4; and CoCT, 2009, Section 3).

[11] The original table is presented in Tawodzera and Crush (2019: 38). It is reproduced with a slight disparity in figures in Young (2020: 22). Figures cited here are from the original.

[12] CoCT, 2009. Confiscations can take place following two written warnings. See Section 18.2. Also see Young, 2020: 17 and 19.

only 11 had ever applied for a bank loan, and none were successful. None had ever accessed any support from the Small Enterprise Development Agency, the Sector Education and Training Authority, the Department of Trade and Industry's Skills Support Programme, the South African Micro-Finance Apex Fund, Khula Enterprise Finance Limited, the National Empowerment Fund, or the Industrial Development Corporation. Only two had accessed COVID-19 relief funds in the previous two years. The country's lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the permit process across South Africa and, in some cases, led to punitive measures against traders who are deemed to be non-compliant (Wegerif, 2020).

The realities of Cape Town's informal economy reveal significant legacies of apartheid that remain unaddressed. A considerable share of the country's population, particularly migrants, still faces exclusion from the labor market. This has important spatial dimensions in Cape Town, as wealthier areas of the city have a lower population density and higher employment density, while the poorer Cape Flats have a higher population density and lower employment density.[13] Informality may be the only employment option where formal employment is absent. Indeed, the informal economy may be the largest source of employment in the city (Petersen and Charman, 2018: 4). For those who enter the informal economy, spatial differences may make policies and regulations less suitable in townships than they are elsewhere, limiting the formalization of economic activities (Scheba and Turok, 2020). But a focus on informality as a source of entrepreneurialism,[14] both in HCP work and elsewhere (also see Tawodzera, 2019), raises a pertinent question: why is entrepreneurialism seen as a solution to poverty and unemployment for those who live in poorer parts of the city, while those in wealthier parts of the city can rely on formal employment?

The enforcement of the laws and regulations that govern informal economic activity is also uneven across the city, with the City itself reporting in 2015 that 100% of informal traders were permitted in the central business district (CBD) and the wealthy southern suburbs compared to a range of 14% to 20% across the poorer Cape Flats.[15] This suggests that informality is tolerated more in poorer areas of the city and more strictly regulated in wealthier business and residential areas. This can be understood in two ways. First, it suggests that the state is less interested in policing livelihood activities in poorer communities, a trend that, following Holland, could be understood as an alternative form of welfare provision where official forms of social assistance are inadequate (Holland, 2016; also see Holland, 2017). Alternatively, it suggests that the state is primarily interested in policing the activities of the poor when they take place in parts of the city where they are viewed as less desirable or essential. Opposition to street vending, a major form of informal trading, as a global phenomenon is often driven by business interests and concerns about aesthetics and

[13] See the image presented in City of Cape Town & the City of Cape Town's Transport and Urban Development Authority (2018: 17).

[14] The most influential neoliberal treatment of informality can be found in De Soto (1989). Skinner (2019: 417) suggests that it is possible that De Soto's book may have influenced a change in policy direction in South Africa.

[15] See the image presented in CoCT (2015: 49). Divisions between parts of the city inferred by the author. For an exploration of this phenomenon in another context, see Holland (2016: 240–242).

urban functionality, tying it inextricably to questions of class.[16] These class concerns are highlighted further, as the geographical patterns of enforcement in Cape Town closely match the geographical patterns of employment and, again, the significant socio-economic divisions that exist in the city.[17]

A disconnect therefore exists between the realities of Cape Town's informal economy and the official policies that exist to govern it. While current policies are apparently designed to offer support, the deep inequalities that exist within the city limit the extent to which the rights of those who engage in informal economic activity can be realized. More fundamentally, a rights-based approach must avoid the danger of conflating two related but separate problems. The first is how to guarantee economic and social rights for those who engage in informal economic activity. For informal traders, this entails providing the same rights protections that all are entitled to and, more specifically, allowing them to enjoy the right to engage in their activities under reasonable conditions that truly facilitate inclusive development. While the freedom to engage in informal trading may be recognized in Cape Town, the regulations that govern it must be designed and enforced in ways that facilitate, rather than constrain, the livelihoods of the poor and allow for the realization of the broad range of economic and social rights provided in the constitution (RSA, 1996).

The second issue surrounds the question of whether informality itself is the result of a lack of economic and social rights for the urban poor, as a combination of poverty and unemployment drive them into precarious livelihood activities with an, at best, ambiguous status before the law that leaves them vulnerable and marginalized. If this is in fact the case, then a rights-based approach requires not only protections and forms of livelihood support for those who freely choose to engage in informal economic activity, but also concerted efforts to address the fundamental rights issues that compel individuals to enter the informal economy in the first place (Young, 2020: 20–22). This appears to be more in line with the "right to work" outlined in Article 6 the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the obligation that it contains for states to take proactive measures to pursue full employment. It is also in line with the three tasks outlined in the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Recommendation 204, adopted in 2015: to promote formalization while respecting the rights and opportunities of those who engage in informal economic activity, to similarly promote the creation and protection of formal sector jobs through coordinated policy measures and to prevent the informalization of employment in the formal economy (ILC, n.d., Paragraph 1). Yet, despite an apparent commitment to economic and social rights that is embedded in the foundations of the post-apartheid South African state, formal employment opportunities for the urban poor are patently inadequate.

[16] Arguments commonly employed against (and for) street vending are presented in Bromley (2000). For competition with formal businesses, see Setšabi and Leduka (2008). Also see Young (2017: 724–727).

[17] See, for example, the Socio-Economic Index illustrated in City of Cape Town & The City of Cape Town's Transport and Urban Development Authority (2018: 28). Details of the index are supplied on page 27.

SOLVING THE CAPE TOWN PUZZLE

An explanation for why the realization of political rights has not led to a full realization of economic and social rights for non-migrants and, particularly, migrants in Cape Town's informal economy is therefore necessary. If the urban poor can exercise influence over policy by participating in democratic processes, then one might expect the outcomes of these processes to be more closely aligned with their interests. Political inclusion, one might expect, should promote economic and social inclusion.

There is indeed an increasing realization that democratic institutions and processes can play a crucial role in improving the governance of informality. There are, broadly conceived, three stages at which democratic processes can influence policy outcomes:

1. *Elections*: eligible citizens can vote for representatives who articulate policy positions that are in line with their interests (see, for example, Agarwala, 2013).
2. *Policymaking*: individuals or groups united by common interests can lobby governments in the pursuit of desired policy outcomes.
3. *Policy implementation*: official policies can be blocked or negotiated when they are put into practice.[18]

A coherent argument that links more inclusive political institutions and processes with the realization of economic and social rights in the informal economy entails important assumptions about how political inclusion can translate into economic and social inclusion. These can be defined as follows:

A. Political systems:
   1. A majority supporting inclusion or a minority supporting inclusion forms a key voting group
   2. Institutions translate support for inclusion into representation
   3. Institutions translate representation into policy
   4. Policies are implemented

B. Voters:
   1. Vote based on policy
   2. Make informed policy decisions
   3. Prioritize informality
   4. Can meaningfully back alternative candidates (i.e., political competition exists)

[18] The significance of the disconnect between the existence and enforcement of laws and regulations that govern informality is often highlighted. See, for example, Cross (1998) and Holland (2016).

C. Politicians:
1. Prioritize re-election
2. Believe actions will have electoral consequences

Many of these assumptions do not hold in Cape Town; and the reasons they do not lie in the intersection of inequality, politics, and migration. First, and most notably here, migrants often lack the ability to vote, meaning that the basic ability that those in the informal economy to exert political influence through electoral pressure simply does not hold.[19] The migrants surveyed by HCP in 2021–2022 had a combination of permits for visitors, refugees, asylum seekers, and permanent residents, while some had no official status.[20] The South African Constitution (RSA, 1996) grants the right to vote to all adult citizens; non-citizens lack such a right (Section 19(3)). If migrants are to exercise political influence through voting, they have to become South African citizens first.

As highlighted above, Cape Town remains defined by socio-economic divisions that, due to apartheid, have major and remarkably entrenched geographic dimensions, and these geographic dimensions are particularly important for the poverty and unemployment trends that underpin the city's informal economy and the enforcement patterns that characterize its governance. These deep socio-economic divisions have significant political implications. Political rights do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they are exercised in both institutional environments made up of the various government structures that exist in a particular place and the political landscape that emerges within that environment. To understand how they are realized or constrained in practice, therefore, it is necessary to understand politics. In South Africa, at the national level, that requires understanding the political hegemony of the ANC. Even without interrogating the nature of the ANC's power or the forms of governance it adopts, it is unlikely that such single-party dominance is conducive to democratic accountability.[21] The assumptions about political inclusion translating into economic and social inclusion outlined above are premised on the existence of electoral competition that will result in incumbents losing power if they are not responsive to public opinion and fail to achieve desired policy outcomes. This has manifestly not occurred in South Africa, despite declining levels of satisfaction with democracy and service delivery and falling levels of political trust.[22]

The fact that the ANC is able to maintain its national political dominance despite poor performance deserves further scrutiny. The ANC has been criticized for becoming unaccountable, abusing its power and abandoning its liberationist

[19] Holland (2017) recognizes this issue in her theory of forbearance.
[20] Many also declined to answer.
[21] See Schulz-Herzenberg (2019: 463–464). For an examination, and ultimately a critique, of the "dominant party" approach to the ANC, see Southall (2014: 332–333). For a further critique of the ANC's dominance, see Friedman (2015).
[22] The significance of these three trends on voting intentions is analyzed in Roberts et al. (2019: 490–492). The authors find these "regime evaluations" less significant than "psychological engagement" and certain "socio-demographic factors"; see pp. 493–495.

roots during its time in office,[23] while the neopatrimonial nature of its politics are deeply ingrained (Lodge, 2014). Two salient points of critique are adopted here in relation to the possibility that it will address the economic and social rights of those who engage in informal economic activity: that its electoral dominance has indeed limited the extent to which it responds to popular input; and that it lacks a strong record of protecting workers (Di Paola and Pons-Vignon, 2013). The party's 2019 election manifesto contains a pledge to finalize a new social security plan that will include formal traders (ANC, 2019: 30), but, while this may prove to be beneficial, other policy proposals for the country's informal economy are absent while the plan to create an additional 275,000 jobs a year appear unconvincing, given the party's longstanding failures to address unemployment (ANC, 2019: 11). Its manifesto also pledges to "[t]ake tough measures against undocumented immigrants involved in crime, including illegal trading in townships" (ANC, 2019: 35) and to "[w]ork with other countries to create incentives for immigrants to stay within their own borders" (ANC, 2019: 43), illustrating the political environment that migrants operate in.

Yet despite its obvious failings and failures, the ANC remains a remarkably successful electoral force. While it is not possible to reduce electoral politics in South Africa to simplistic understandings of the country's racial divisions,[24] particularly as the growing Black middle class demonstrates less commitment to the ANC,[25] a poll conducted by the Pew Research Centre ahead of the 2019 elections found that 73% of Black South Africans still hold favorable views of the ANC, in contrast to only 27% of white and 30% of Coloured voters (Tamir and Budiman, 2019). Racial divisions are still the defining feature of inequality in South Africa, and it is this intersection of race and inequality, a legacy of a long history of discrimination culminating in apartheid, that has significant electoral resonance and serves as a major obstacle to equal rights protections in the country. The 2024 general election may ultimately prove to have shaken this dynamic, but it has likely failed to fundamentally transform it.

Local politics in Cape Town and provincial politics in the Western Cape, where the CoCT is located, are, in contrast, dominated by the Democratic Alliance (DA). The DA is also a more explicitly neoliberal party than the ANC. In its manifesto for the 2019 elections (2019: 26), it included providing "targeted support for micro-entrepreneurs in the informal economy" as the fifth of its six-point Small Business Development plan. However, it again adopts a neoliberal framing of informality as entrepreneurship, focusing on, beyond promises for a comprehensive survey and the development of a Code of Good Practice for engagement, legal and regulatory reforms, "including property rights and the ability to enforce contracts"; providing trading spaces as the party has done where it is in power, including, implicitly, Cape Town; and easing the registration process. It claims that informality represents "economic activity happening organically in a country where economic activity

[23] For different treatments of the ANC, see Southall (2014).

[24] For a critical overview of research on South African elections, see Everatt (2016: 51–53).

[25] This also has spatial dimensions, although Rule (2018: 152–154) finds these are less prominent in Cape Town than they are in Johannesburg.

is relatively scarce," but a framing that focuses on poverty and unemployment is conspicuously absent. The problems of unemployment, "stagnant growth, grinding poverty and worsening inequality" are highlighted in the party's plan – the cornerstone of the manifesto – to create jobs, but employment again seems to be secondary to entrepreneurialism (2019: 10). Describing the party's "approach to broad-based empowerment" (2019: 19) as part of its plan for "[e]conomic justice for all" (2019: 18), it proposes to reward companies that create employment as "ultimately, if you can't be an entrepreneur, the best form of real empowerment is to get your foot on the ladder of opportunity through a job" (2019: 20). The DA criticizes the ANC government for its apparent failures on migration policy, stressing that "South Africa desperately needs skills and is, and should continue to be, a cosmopolitan country with residents from across the globe and the African continent. But this migration must happen in a legal manner" (2019: 72). It claims that "[s]killed immigrants, traders and business people will be welcome in our country" and that "traders who enter the country to do business and receive supplies [will be] regularized and/or receive specialised trading permits" (2019: 73).

If the DA's ideological commitments incline it to view informality through a neoliberal lens, it is important to note that Cape Town's electoral geography provides it with few incentives to change course. As Rule (2018: 154–155) found in an analysis of the 2016 local elections, the ward demographics in Cape Town that correlate most strongly with support for the DA are speaking English or Afrikaans, a larger white population, a larger Coloured population, satellite television ownership, higher median age and higher median income earners. Support for the ANC, in contrast, correlates most strongly with speaking isiXhosa, a larger Black African population, residents in informal dwellings and the Multiple Poverty Index, while support for the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), an avowedly "radical and militant economic emancipation movement" is correlated most strongly with a larger Black African population and speaking isiXhosa.[26] The DA is less reliant on voters from poorer parts of the city than voters from wealthier areas.[27] If informality can be understood in class terms and its governance can be seen to represent particular class interests over others, then a party in government that prioritizes re-election might be expected to pursue the interests of its electoral base that will fundamentally be tied to class. If doing so can be framed in accordance with pre-existing ideological principles, then the likelihood of deviation should be expected to be reduced further. This, it seems, is the reality facing the DA in Cape Town.

South African politics displays a considerable degree of what is referred to here as "electoral stickiness," or the slow or limited response of voting behavior in line with policy preferences to changing political conditions. There are signs that this is perhaps changing, but these provide few reasons for optimism. While partisan loyalties are declining, abstentions from voting are rising (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019:

[26] Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (n.d.: 6). As above, the page number used here is based on the document pages when viewed online.

27 See the spatial patterns of voting in the city discussed in Rule (2018: 150–152).

471–472). This could indicate that voters increasingly feel that their votes will be inconsequential. As Roberts et al. (2019: 488–490) illustrate, faith in the political efficacy of voting has experienced a long-term decline, and, along with levels of political interest and a sense of duty to vote in principle, is lower among those who abstain from voting. They also found that that young people are more likely to abstain from voting (Roberts et al., 2019: 487–488, 492–495). Of equal concern, Everatt (2016: 61-63) found that the poor may be becoming less likely to register or to vote; while this, given their tendency to vote for the ANC in large numbers coupled with the expansion of a Black middle class that may be less inclined to support the ruling party, could lead to greater political competition, it is not a welcome trend. It is also particularly consequential for the prospects of the poor to translate their political rights into the realization of economic and social rights.

In relation to the assumptions about how political inclusion is translated into economic and social inclusion outlined above, therefore, one can observe several ways in which politics in post-apartheid South Africa falls short. Those who might desire greater protections for the rights of those who engage in informal economic activity, either through support for informal trading or through greater efforts to promote formal employment, would face significant obstacles in any effort to influence policy. At the national level, the ruling party has become unresponsive and increasingly unable to improve the lives of the poor, but it nevertheless continues to be successful in elections, even if its fortunes are diminishing. The pathway from popular opinion – if indeed greater inclusion for those in the informal economy commands popular support or would allow for the formation of an important interest group – to policy is frayed, but politicians in the ANC, on the whole, have not suffered major consequences. At the local level, the DA's ideological commitments cause it to view informality in a way that is disconnected from concerns about poverty and unemployment, and it, too, has few electoral reasons to change its position.

This political landscape interacts with, and is shaped by, a socio-economic context in which extreme levels of inequality are both racialized and spatialized. These inequalities have proven intractable since the end of apartheid. The failure to address economic and social rights has been followed by a politics that has so far been unable to address economic and social rights. Profound structural inequalities remain at the heart of South African democracy and the biggest obstacle to the realization of the ambitions of equality that accompanied the country's transition.

CONCLUSIONS

South Africa's post-apartheid politics has failed workers in the country's informal economy. Despite the significant benefits that democratization has brought, a combination of inequality, party politics, and migration have limited possibilities for greater inclusion. In a content defined by marginalization, migrants face more challenges than most: an inability, in most cases, to vote leaves them without traditional means of formal political influence and makes them easy targets for the

type of xenophobic politics that South Africa has long struggled with. The Cape Town puzzle may be solvable in theory, but it persists in practice.

The extent to which the 2024 general election may offer meaningful change, or at least serve as an early sign of meaningful change to come at some point in the future, remains to be seen. The Government of National Unity quickly put "the achievement of rapid, inclusive and sustainable economic growth to create jobs" "[a]t the top of the list of priorities" that it has (RSA, 2024). Much the same has been promised in the past, however, and little has been delivered. It is unlikely that the assumptions that link political inclusion to economic and social rights in the informal economy have been brought about by a single, albeit significant, election result. More change is likely needed for the promise of South Africa's democratization to be realized. For migrants in Cape Town's informal food economy – indeed for all South Africans – that change cannot come soon enough.

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